P. o. angl. 224 m-8

<3662018325001 4

<3662018325001 4

Bayer. Staatsbibliothek

P. C. angl.
224m-8

COLLECTION
OF
BRITISH AUTHORS
TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 3124.

THE SOWERS.
BY
HENRY SETON MERRIMAN.

IN TWO VOLUMES. — VOL. 2.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.
PARIS: LIBRAIRIE C. REINWALD, 15, RUE DES SAINTS-PÈRES.
PARIS: THE GALIGNANI LIBRARY, 224, RUE DE RIVOLI,
AND AT NICE, 48, QUAI ST. JEAN BAPTISTE.

50 H
440 F

This Collection
is published with copyright for Continental circulation, but all purchasers are earnestly requested not to introduce the volumes into England or into any British Colony.

April 1896.

Tauchnitz Edition.

Latest Volumes:

(Continued from cover of vol. I.)

The Stark Munro Letters.

A New Work by **A. Conan Doyle.**

1 vol.

Memories and Studies of War and Peace.

A New Work by **Archibald Forbes.**

2 vols.

The Days of Auld Langsyne.

A New Work by **Ian Maclaren.**

1 vol.

From the Memoirs of A Minister of France.

A New Work by **Stanley J. Weyman.**

1 vol.

Casa Braccio.

A New Novel by **F. Marion Crawford.**

2 vols.

Toxin and other Papers.

The Newest Volume.

By **Ouida.**

The Professor's Experiment.

A New Novel by Mrs. **Hungerford.**

2 vols.

(Continued on page 3 of cover.)

COLLECTION

OF

BRITISH AUTHORS

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 3124.

THE SOWERS. BY HENRY SETON MERRIMAN.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

BIBLIOTHECA
REGIA
MONACHENSIS

THE SOWERS

BY

HENRY SETON MERRIMAN,

AUTHOR OF

"YOUNG MISTLEY," "WITH EDGED TOOLS," ETC.

COPYRIGHT EDITION.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1896.

BIBLIOTECA
REGIA
MONACENSIS

CONTENTS

OF VOLUME II.

			Page
CHAPTER	I.	A Winter Scene	7
—	II.	Home	18
—	III.	Osterno	30
—	IV.	Bloodhounds	41
—	V.	In the Web	55
—	VI.	In the Castle of Thors	67
—	VII.	Anglo-Russian	79
—	VIII.	Wolf!	91
—	IX.	A dangerous Experiment	104
—	X.	A Cloud	116
—	XI.	The Net is drawn	128
—	XII.	An Appeal	141
—	XIII.	On the Edge of the Storm	153
—	XIV.	À trois	165
—	XV.	À deux	178

			Page
CHAPTER	XVI.	A Tale that is told	190
—	XVII.	Husband and Wife	202
—	XVIII.	Stepán returns	214
—	XIX.	Duty	226
—	XX.	The Storm bursts	237
—	XXI.	Behind the Veil	250
—	XXII.	Kismet	263

Bayerische
Staatsbibliothek
MÜNCHEN

THE SOWERS.

CHAPTER I.

A WINTER SCENE.

BETWEEN Petersburg and the sea there are several favourite islands more or less assigned to the foreigners residing in the Russian capital. Here the English live, and in summer the familiar cries of the tennis-lawn may be heard, while in winter snow-shoeing, skating, and tobogganing hold merry sway.

It was here, namely on the island of Christeffsky, that a great ice *fête* was held on the day preceding the departure of the Howard-Alexis household for Tver. The *fête* was given by one of the foreign ambassadors, a gentleman whose wife was accredited to the first place in Petersburg society. It was absolutely necessary, Steinmetz averred, for the whole Howard-Alexis party to put in an appearance.

The *fête* was supposed to begin at four in the afternoon, and by five o'clock all St. Petersburg—all, *c'est à dire,* worthy of mention in that aristocratic city—had arrived. One may be sure Claude de Chauxville arrived early, in beautiful furs, with a pair of silver-plated skates under his arm. He was an influential member of the Cercle des Patineurs in Paris. Steinmetz arrived soon after, to look on, as he told his many friends. He was, he averred, too stout to skate and too heavy for the little iron sleds on the ice-hills.

"No, no!" he said, "there is nothing left for me but to watch. I shall watch De Chauxville," he added, turning to that graceful skater with a grim smile. De Chauxville nodded and laughed.

"You have been doing that any time these twenty years, *mon ami,*" he said, as he stood upright on his skates and described an easy little figure on the outside edge backwards.

"And have always found you on slippery ground."

"And never a fall," said De Chauxville over his shoulder, as he shot away across the brilliantly lighted pond.

It was quite dark. A young moon was rising over the city, throwing out in dark relief against the sky a hundred steeples and domes. The long, thin

spire of the Fortress Church—the tomb of the Romanoffs—shot up into the heavens like a spear. Near at hand, a thousand electric lights and coloured lanterns, cunningly swung on the branches of the pines, made a veritable fairyland. The ceaseless song of the skates, on ice as hard as iron, mingled with the strains of a band playing in a kiosk with open windows. From the ice-hills came the swishing scream of the iron runners down the terrific slope. The Russians are a people of great emotions. There is a candour in their recognition of the needs of the senses which does not obtain in our self-conscious nature.

These strangely constituted people of the North—a budding nation, a nation which shall some day overrun the world—are easily intoxicated. And there is a deliberation about their methods of seeking this enjoyment which appears at times almost brutal. There is nothing more characteristic than the ice-hill.

Imagine a slope as steep as a roof, paved with solid blocks of ice, which are subsequently frozen together by flooding with water; imagine a sledge with steel runners polished like a knife; imagine a thousand lights on either side of this glittering path, and you have some idea of an ice-hill. It is certainly

the strongest form of excitement imaginable—next, perhaps, to whale-fishing.

There is no question of breathing, once the sledge has been started by the attendant. The sensation is somewhat suggestive of a fall from a balloon, and yet one goes to the top again, as surely as the drunkard will return to his bottle. Fox-hunting is child's play to it, and yet grave men have prayed that they might die in pink.

Steinmetz was standing at the foot of the ice-hill when an arm was slipped within his.

"Will you take me down?" asked Maggie Delafield.

He turned and smiled at her—fresh and blooming in her furs.

"No, my dear young lady. But thank you for suggesting it."

"Is it very dangerous?"

"Very. But I think you ought to try it. It is a revelation. It is an epoch in your life. When I was a younger man I used to sneak away to an ice-hill where I was not known, and spend hours of the keenest enjoyment. Where is Paul?"

"He has just gone over there with Etta."

"She refuses to go?"

"Yes," answered Maggie.

Steinmetz looked down at his companion with his smile of quiet resignation.

"You tell me you are afraid of mice," he said.

"I hate mice," she replied. "Yes—I suppose I am afraid of them."

"The Princess is not afraid of *rats*—she is afraid of very little, the Princess, and yet she will not go on the ice-hill. What strange creatures, Mademoiselle! Come, let us look for Paul. He is the only man who may be trusted to take you down."

They found Paul and Etta together in one of the brilliantly lighted kiosks where refreshments were being served, all hot and steaming, by fur-clad servants. It was a singular scene. If a coffee-cup was left for a few moments on the table by the watchful servitors, the spoon froze to the saucer. The refreshments—bread and butter, dainty sandwiches of caviare, of *pâté de foie gras,* of a thousand *Delicatessen* from Berlin and Petersburg—were kept from freezing on hot-water dishes. The whole scene was typical of life in the northern capital, where wealth wages a successful fight against climate. Open fires burned brilliantly in iron tripods within the doorway of the tent, and at intervals in the gardens. In a large hall a string band consoled those whose

years or lungs would not permit of the more vigorous outdoor entertainments.

Steinmetz made known to Paul Maggie's desire to risk her life on the ice-hills, and gallantly proposed to take care of the Princess until his return.

"Then," said Etta gaily, "you must skate. It is much too cold to stand about. They are going to dance a cotillon."

"If it is your command, Princess, I obey with alacrity."

Etta spoke rapidly, looking round her all the while with the bright enjoyment which overspreads the faces of some women at almost any form of entertainment, provided there be music, brilliant lights, and a crowd of people. Etta's eyes gleamed with excitement. She was beautifully dressed in furs, which adornment she was tall and stately enough to carry to full advantage. She held her graceful head with regal hauteur, every inch a princess. She was enjoying her keenest pleasure—a social triumph. No whisper escaped her, no glance, no nudge of admiring or envious notice. On Steinmetz's arm she passed out of the tent; the touch of her hand on his sleeve reminded him of a thoroughbred horse stepping on to turf, so full of life, of electric thrill, of excitement was it. But then Karl

Steinmetz was a cynic. No one else could have thought of comparing Etta's self-complaisant humour to that of a horse in a racing paddock.

They procured skates and glided off hand in hand, equally proficient, equally practised, maybe on this same lake; for both had learnt to skate in Russia.

They talked only of the present, of the brilliancy of the *fête,* of the music, of the thousand lights. Etta was quite incapable of thinking or talking of any other subject at that moment.

Steinmetz distinguished Claude de Chauxville easily enough, and avoided him with some success for a short time. But De Chauxville soon caught sight of them.

"Here is Monsieur de Chauxville," said Etta, with a pleased ring in her voice. "Leave me with him. I expect you are tired."

"I am not tired, but I am obedient," replied Steinmetz, as the Frenchman came up with his fur cap in his hand, bowing gracefully. Claude de Chauxville usually overdid things. There is something honest in a clumsy bow which had no place in his courtly obeisance.

Although Steinmetz continued to skate in a leisurely way, he also held to his original intention of looking on. He saw Paul and Maggie come back

to the edge of the lake, accompanied by an English lady of some importance in Russia, with whom Maggie presently went away to the concert-room.

Steinmetz glided up to Paul, who was lighting a cigarette at the edge of the pond, where an attendant stood by an open wood-fire with cigarettes and hot beverages.

"Get a pair of skates," said the German. "This ice is marvellous—colossa-a-a-l."

He amused himself with describing figures until Paul joined him.

"Where is Etta?" asked the Prince at once.

"Over there, with De Chauxville."

Paul said nothing for a few moments. They skated side by side round the lake. It was too cold to stand still even for a minute.

"I told you," remarked Paul at length, "that that fellow is coming to Thors."

"I wish he would go to the devil," said Steinmetz.

"No doubt he will in time," answered Paul carelessly.

"Yes; but not soon enough. I assure you, Paul, I do not like it. We are just in that position that the least breath of suspicion will get us into endless trouble. The authorities know that Stepán Lanovitch has escaped. At any moment the Charity League

scandal may be resuscitated. We do not want fellows like De Chauxville prowling about. I know the man. He is a scoundrel who would sell his immortal soul if he could get a bid for it. What is he coming to Thors for? He is not a sportsman; why, he would be afraid of a cock pheasant, though he would be plucky enough among the hens. You don't imagine he is in love with Catrina, do you?"

"No," said Paul sharply, "I don't."

Steinmetz raised his bushy eyebrows. Etta and De Chauxville skated past them at that moment, laughing gaily.

"I have been thinking about it," went on Steinmetz, "and I have come to the conclusion that our friend hates you personally. He has a grudge of some sort against you. Of course he hates me, *cela va sans dire.* He has come to Russia to watch us. That I am convinced of. He has come here bent on mischief. It may be that he is hard up and is to be bought. He is always to be bought, ce bon De Chauxville, at a price. We shall see."

Steinmetz paused and glanced at Paul. He could not tell him more. He could not tell him that his wife had sold the Charity League papers to those who wanted them. He could not tell him all that he knew of Etta's past. None of these things

could Karl Steinmetz, in his philosophy, tell to the person whom they most concerned. And who are we that we may hold him wrong? The question of telling and withholding is not to be dismissed in a few words. But it seems very certain that there is too much telling, too much speaking out and too little holding in, in these days of much publicity. There is a school of speakers-out, and would to heaven they would learn to hold their tongues! There is a school for calling spades by no other name, and they have still to learn that the world is by no means interested in their chatter of shovels.

Karl Steinmetz was a man who formed his opinion on the best basis—namely, experience, and that had taught him that a bold reticence does less harm to one's neighbour than a weak volubility.

Paul was an easy subject for such treatment. His own method inclined to err on the side of reticence. He gave few confidences and asked none, as is the habit of Englishmen.

"Well," he said, "I do not suppose he will stay long at Thors, and I know that he will not stay at all at Osterno. Besides, what harm can he actually do to us? He cannot well go about making inquiries. To begin with, he knows no Russian."

"I doubt that," put in Steinmetz.

"And even if he does, he cannot come poking about in Osterno. Catrina will give him no information. Maggie hates him. You and I know him. There is only the Countess."

"Who will tell him all she knows! She would render that service to a droski driver."

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

There was no mention of Etta. They stood side by side, both thinking of her, both looking at her, as she skated with De Chauxville. There lay the danger, and they both knew it. But she was the wife of one of them, and their lips were necessarily sealed.

"And it will be permitted," Claude de Chauxville happened to be saying at that moment, "that I call and pay my respects to an exiled princess?"

"There will be difficulties," answered Etta, in that tone which makes it necessary to protest that difficulties are nothing under some circumstances—which De Chauxville duly protested with much fervour.

"You think that twenty miles of snow would deter me," he said.

"Well, they might."

"They might if—well———"

He left the sentence unfinished—the last re-

source of the sneak and the coward who wishes to reserve to himself the letter of the denial in the spirit of the meanest lie.

CHAPTER II.

HOME.

A TEARING, howling wind from the north—from the boundless snow-clad plains of Russia that lie between the Neva and the Yellow Sea; a grey sky washed over as with a huge brush dipped in dirty whiting; and the plains of Tver a spotless, dazzling level of snow.

The snow was falling softly and steadily—falling, as it never falls in England, in little more than fine powder, with a temperature forty degrees below freezing point. A drift—constant, restless, never altering—sped over the level plain like the dust on a high-road before a steady wind. This white scud—a flying scud of frozen water—was singularly like the scud that is blown from the crest of the waves by a cyclone in the China Seas. Any object that broke the wind—a stunted pine, a broken tree-trunk, a Government road-post—had at its leeward side a high, narrow snow-drift tailing off to the dead level

of the plain. Where the wind dropped the snow rose at once. But these objects were few and far between. The deadly monotony of the scene—the trackless level, the preposterous dimensions of the plain, the sense of distance that is conveyed only by the steppe and the great desert of Gobi when the snow lies on it—all these tell the same grim truth to all who look on them, the old truth that man is but a small thing and his life but the flower of grass.

Across the plain of Tver, before the north wind, a single sleigh was tearing as fast as horse could lay hoof to ground—a sleigh driven by Paul Alexis, and the track of it was as a line drawn from point to point across a map.

A striking feature of the winter of Northern Russia is the glorious uncertainty of its snowfalls. At Tver the weather-wise had said:

"The snow has not all fallen yet. More is coming. It is yellow in the sky, although March is nearly gone."

The landlord of the hotel (a good enough resting-place facing the broad Volga) had urged upon Monsieur le Prince the advisability of waiting, as is the way of landlords all the world over. But Etta had shown a strange restlessness, a petulant desire

to hurry forward at all risks. She hated Tver; the hotel was uncomfortable, there was an unhealthy smell about the place.

Paul acceded readily enough to her wishes. He rather liked Tver. In a way he was proud of this busy town—a centre of Russian civilisation. He would have liked Etta to be favourably impressed with it, as any prejudice would naturally reflect upon Osterno, a hundred and forty miles across the steppe. But with a characteristic silent patience he made the necessary preparations for an immediate start.

The night express from St. Petersburg had deposited them on the platform in the early morning. Steinmetz had preceded them. Closed sleighs from Osterno were awaiting them. A luxurious breakfast was prepared at the hotel. Relays of horses were posted along the road. The journey to Osterno had been carefully planned and arranged by Steinmetz —a king among organisers. The sleigh drive across the steppe was to be accomplished in ten hours.

The snow had begun to fall as they clattered across the floating bridge of Tver. It had fallen ever since, and the afternoon lowered gloomily. In America such visitations are called "blizzards," here

in Russia it is merely "the snow." The freezing wind is taken as a matter of course.

At a distance of one hundred miles from Tver, the driver of the sleigh containing Etta, Maggie, and Paul had suddenly rolled off his perch. His hands were frost-bitten; a piteous blue face peered out at his master through ice-laden eye-brows, moustache, and beard. In a moment Maggie was out in the snow beside the two men, while Etta hastily closed the door.

"He is all right," said Paul; "it is only the cold. Pour some brandy into his mouth while I hold the ice aside. *Don't* take off your gloves. The flask will stick to your fingers."

Maggie obeyed with her usual breezy readiness, turning to nod reassurance to Etta, who, truth to tell, had pulled up the rime-covered windows, shutting out the whole scene.

"He must come inside," said Maggie. "We are nice and warm with all the hot-water cans."

Paul looked rather dubiously towards the sleigh.

"You can carry him, I suppose?" said the girl cheerfully. "He is not very big—he is all fur coat."

Etta looked rather disgusted, but made no objection, while Paul lifted the frozen man into the seat he had just vacated.

"When you are cold I will drive," cried Maggie, as Paul shut the door. "I should love it."

Thus it came about that a single sleigh was speeding across the plain of Tver.

Paul, with the composure that comes of a large experience, gathered the reins in his two hands, driving with both and with extended arms, after the manner of Russian yemschiks. For a man must accommodate himself to circumstance, and fingerless gloves are not conducive to a finished style of handling the ribbons.

This driver knew that the next station was twenty miles off; that at any moment the horses might break down or plunge into a drift. He knew that in the event of such emergencies it would be singularly easy for four people to die of cold within a few miles of help. But he had faced such possibilities a hundred times before in this vast country, where the standard price of a human life is no great sum. He was not, therefore, dismayed, but rather took delight in battling with strong elements, as all strong men should, and most of them, thank Heaven, do.

Moreover, he battled successfully, and before the moon was well up drew rein outside the village of Osterno, to accede at last to the oft-repeated

prayer of the driver that he might return to his task.

"It is not meet," the man had gruffly said whenever a short halt was made to change horses, "that a great prince should drive a yemschik."

"It cannot be helped," answered Paul simply.

Then he clambered into the sleigh and drew up the windows, hiding his head as he drove through his own village, where every life depended on his charity.

They were silent, for the ladies were tired and cold.

"We shall soon be there," said Paul reassuringly. But he did not lower the windows and look out, as any man might have wished to do, on returning to the place of his birth.

Maggie sat back, wrapped in her furs. She was meditating over the events of the day, and more particularly over a certain skill, a quickness of touch, a deft handling of stricken men which she had noted far out on the snowy steppe a few hours earlier. Paul was a different man when he had to deal with pain and sickness; he was quicker, brighter, full of confidence in himself. For the great sympathy was his—that love of the neighbour which is thrown like a mantle over the shoulders of some men, making

them different from their fellows, securing to them the love of great and small which, perchance, follows some when they are dead to that place where a human testimony may not be vain.

At the castle all was in readiness for the Prince and Princess, their departure from Tver having been telegraphed. On the threshold of the great house, before she had entered the magnificent hall, Etta's eyes brightened, her fatigue vanished. She played her part before the crowd of bowing servants with that forgetfulness of mere bodily fatigue which is expected of princesses and other great ladies. She swept up the broad staircase, leaning on Paul's arm, with a carriage, a presence, a dazzling wealth of beauty, which did not fail to impress the onlookers. Whatever Etta may have failed to bring to Paul Howard-Alexis as a wife, she made him a matchless princess.

He led her straight through the drawing-room to her suite of rooms. These consisted of an ante-room, a small drawing-room, and her private apartments beyond.

Paul stopped in the drawing-room, looking round with a simple satisfaction in all that had been done by his orders for Etta's comfort.

"These," he said, "are your rooms."

He was no adept at turning a neat phrase—at reeling off a pretty, honeymoon welcome. Perhaps he expected her to express delight, to come to him, possibly, and kiss him, as some women would have done.

She looked round critically.

"Yes," she said, "they are very nice."

She crossed the room and drew aside the curtain that covered the double-latticed windows. The room was so warm that there was no rime on the panes. She gave a little shudder, and he went to her side, putting his arm around her.

Below them, stretching away beneath the brilliant moonlight, lay the country that was his inheritance, an estate as large as a large English county. Immediately beneath them, at the foot of the great rock upon which the castle was built, nestled the village of Osterno—straggling, squalid.

"Oh!" she said dully, "this is Siberia. This is terrible."

It had never presented itself to him in that light, the wonderful stretch of country over which they were looking.

"It is not so bad," he said, "in the daylight."

And that was all; for he had no persuasive tongue.

"That is the village," he went on after a little

pause. "Those are the people who look to us to help them in their fight against terrible odds. I hoped—that you would be interested in them."

She looked down curiously at the little wooden huts, half buried in the snow; the smoking chimneys; the twinkling curtainless windows.

"What do you expect me to do?" she asked in a queer voice.

He looked at her in a sort of wonderment. Perhaps it seemed to him that a woman should have no need to ask such a question.

"It is a long story," he said; "I will tell you about it another time. You are tired now, after your journey."

His arm slipped from her waist. They stood side by side. And both were conscious of a feeling of difference. They were not the same as they had been in London. The atmosphere of Russia seemed to have had some subtle effect upon them.

Etta turned and sat slowly down on a low chair before the fire. She had thrown her furs aside, and they lay in a luxurious heap on the floor. The maids, hearing that the Prince and the Princess were together, waited silently in the next room behind the closed door.

"I think I had better hear it now," said Etta.

"But you are tired," protested her husband. "You should rest until dinner time."

"No; I am not tired."

He came towards her and stood with one elbow on the mantelpiece, looking down at her—a strong man, who had already forgotten his feat of endurance of a few hours earlier.

"These people," he said, "would die of starvation and cold and sickness if we did not help them. It is simply impossible for them in the few months that they can work the land to cultivate it so as to yield any more than their taxes. They are overtaxed, and no one cares. The army must be kept up and a huge Civil Service, and no one cares what happens to the peasants. Some day the peasants *must* turn, but not yet. It is a question for all Russian landowners to face, and nobody faces it. If anyone tries to improve the condition of his peasants—they were happier a thousand times as serfs—the bureaucrats of Petersburg mark him down and he is forced to leave the country. The whole fabric of this Government is rotten, but everyone, except the peasants, would suffer by its fall, and therefore it stands."

Etta was staring into the fire. It was impossible

to say whether she heard with comprehension or not. Paul went on:

"There is nothing left, therefore, but to do good by stealth. I studied medicine with that view. Steinmetz has scraped and economised the working of the estate for the same purpose. The Government will not allow us to have a doctor; they prevent us from organising relief and education on anything like an adequate scale. They do it all by underhand means. They have not the pluck to oppose us openly. For years we have been doing what we can. We have almost eradicated cholera. They do not die of starvation now. And they are learning—very slowly, but still they are learning. We—I—thought you might be interested in your people; you might want to help."

She gave a short little nod. There was a suggestion of suspense in her whole being and attitude, as if she were waiting to hear something which she knew could not be avoided.

"A few years ago," he went on, "a gigantic scheme was set on foot. I told you a little about it—the Charity League."

Her lips moved, but no sound came from them, so she nodded a second time. A tiny carriage clock on the mantelpiece struck seven, and she looked up

in a startled way, as if the sound had frightened her. The castle was quite still. Silence seemed to brood over the old walls.

"That fell through," he went on, "as I told you. It was betrayed. Stepán Lanovitch was banished. He has escaped, however; Steinmetz has seen him. He succeeded in destroying some of the papers before the place was searched after the robbery—one paper in particular. If he had not destroyed that, I should have been banished. I was one of the leaders of the Charity League. Steinmetz and I got the thing up. It would have been for the happiness of millions of peasants if it had not been betrayed. In time—we shall find out who did it."

He paused. He did not say what he would do when he had found out.

Etta was staring into the fire. Her lips were dry. She hardly seemed to be breathing.

"It is possible," he went on in his strong, quiet, inexorable voice, "that Stepán Lanovitch knows now."

Etta did not move. She was staring into the fire —staring—staring.

Then she slowly fainted, rolling from the low chair to the fur hearthrug.

Paul picked her up like a child and carried her

to the bedroom, where the maids were waiting to dress her.

"Your mistress has fainted," he said, "from the fatigue of the journey."

And, with his practised medical knowledge, he himself tended her.

CHAPTER III.

OSTERNO.

"ALWAYS gay; always gay!" laughed Steinmetz, rubbing his broad hands together and looking down into the face of Maggie, who was busy at the breakfast-table.

"Yes," answered the girl, glancing towards Paul, leaning against the window reading his letters. "Yes, always gay. Why not?"

Karl Steinmetz saw the glance. It was one of the little daily incidents that one sees and half forgets. He only half forgot it.

"Why not, indeed?" he answered. "And you will be glad to hear that Ivanovitch is as ready as yourself this morning to treat the matter as a joke. He is none the worse for his freezing and all the better for his experience. You have added another

friend, my dear young lady, to a list which is, doubtless, a very long one."

"He is a nice man," answered Maggie.

"I hope the Princess is not overtired," went on Steinmetz, with a certain formal politeness which seemed to accompany any mention of Etta's name.

"Not at all, thank you," replied Etta herself, coming into the room at that moment. She looked fresh and self-confident. "On the contrary, I am full of energy and eagerness to explore the castle. One naturally takes an interest in one's baronial halls."

With this she walked slowly to the window. She stood there looking out, and everyone in the room was watching. On looking for the first time on the same view a few moments earlier, Maggie had uttered a little cry of surprise, and had then remained silent. Etta looked out of the window and said nothing. It was a most singular outlook—weird, uncouth, prehistoric, as some parts of the earth still are. The castle was built on the edge of a perpendicular cliff. On this side it was impregnable. Any object dropped from the breakfast-room window would fall a clear two hundred feet to the brawling Oster River. The rock was black, and shining like the topmost crags of an Alpine mountain where snow

and ice have polished the bare stone. Beyond and across the river lay the boundless steppe—a sheet of virgin snow.

Etta stood looking over this to the far horizon, where the white snow and the grey sky softly merged into one. Her first remark was characteristic, as first and last remarks usually are.

"And as far as you can see is yours?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Paul simply.

The observation attracted Steinmetz's attention. He went to another window, and looked across the waste critically.

"Four times as far as we can see is his," he said.

Etta looked out slowly and comprehensively, absorbing it all like a long sweet drink. There was no hereditary calmness in her sense of possession.

"And where is Thors?" she asked.

Paul stretched out his arm, pointing with a lean, steady finger. "It lies out there," he answered.

Another of the little incidents that are only half forgotten. Some of the persons assembled in that room remembered the pointing finger long afterwards.

"It makes one feel very small," said Etta, turning

to the breakfast-table—"at no time a pleasant sensation."

"Do you know," she said, after a little pause, "I think it probable that I shall become very fond of Osterno, but I wish it were nearer to civilisation."

Paul looked pleased. Steinmetz had a queer expression on his face. Maggie murmured something about one's surroundings making but little difference to one's happiness, and the subject was wisely shelved.

After breakfast Steinmetz withdrew.

"Now," said Paul, "shall I show you the old place, you and Maggie?"

Etta signified her readiness, but Maggie said that she had letters to write, that Etta could show her the castle another time, when the men were out shooting perhaps.

"But," said Etta, "I shall do it horribly badly. They are not my ancestors, you know. I shall attach the stories to the wrong people, and locate the ghost in the wrong room. You will be wise to take Paul's guidance."

"No, thank you," replied Maggie, quite firmly and frankly. "I feel inclined to write; and the feeling is rare, so I must take advantage of it."

The girl looked at her cousin with something in

her honest blue eyes that almost amounted to wonder. Etta was always surprising her. There was a whole gamut of feeling, an octave of callow, half-formed girlish instincts, of which Etta seemed to be deprived. If she had ever had them, no trace was left of their whilom presence. At first Maggie had flatly refused to come to Russia. When Paul pressed her to do so, she accepted with a sort of wonder. There was something which she did not understand.

The same instinct made her refuse now to accompany Paul and Etta over their new home. Again Etta pressed her, showing her lack of some feeling which Maggie indefinitely knew she ought to have had. This time Paul made no sign. He added no word to Etta's persuasions, but stood gravely looking at his wife.

When the door had closed behind them Maggie stood for some minutes by the window looking out over the snowclad plain and the rugged, broken rocks beneath her.

Then she turned to the writing-table. She resolutely took pen and paper, but the least thing seemed to distract her attention—the coronet on the notepaper cost her five minutes of far-off reflection. She took up the pen again, and wrote "Dear Mother."

The room grew darker. Maggie looked up. The

snow had begun again. It was driving past the window with a silent, purposeful monotony. The girl drew the writing-case towards her. She examined the pen critically and dipped it into the ink. But she added nothing to the two words already written.

The castle of Osterno is almost unique in the particular that one roof covers the ancient and the modern buildings. The vast reception-rooms, worthy of the name of state-rooms, adjoin the small stone-built apartments of the fortress which Paul's ancestors had held against the Tartars. This grimmer side of the building Paul reserved to the last for reasons of his own, and Etta's manifest delight in the grandeur of the more modern apartments fully rewarded him. Here, again, that side of her character manifested itself which has already been shown. She was dazzled and exhilarated by the splendour of it all, and the immediate effect was a feeling of affection towards the man to whom this belonged, who was in act, if not in word, laying it at her feet.

When they passed from the lofty rooms to the dimmer passages of the old castle, Etta's spirits visibly dropped, her interest slackened. He told her of tragedies enacted in bygone times—such ancient tales of violent death and broken hearts as attach themselves to grey stone walls and dungeon keeps.

She only half listened, for her mind was busy with the splendours they had left behind, with the purposes to which such splendours could be turned. And the sum-total of her thoughts was gratified vanity.

Her bright presence awakened the gloom of ages within the dimly-lit historical rooms. Her laugh sounded strangely light and frivolous and shallow in the silence of the ages which had brooded within these walls since the days of Tamerlane. It was perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Alexis family, this beautiful tragedy that walked by the side of Paul.

"I am glad your grandfather brought French architects here and built the modern side," she said. "These rooms are, of course, very interesting, but gloomy—horribly gloomy, Paul. There is a smell of ghosts and dulness."

"All the same, I like these rooms," answered Paul. "Steinmetz and I used to live entirely on this side of the house. This is the smoking-room. We shot those bears, and all the deer. That is a wolf's head. He killed a keeper before I finished him off."

Etta looked at her husband with a curious little smile. She sometimes felt proud of him, despite the ever-present knowledge that, intellectually speaking,

she was his superior. There was something strong and simple and manly, in a sort of mediæval way, that pleased her in this big husband of hers.

"And how did you finish him off?" she asked.

"I choked him. That bear knocked me down, but Steinmetz shot him. We were four days out in the open after that elk. This is a lynx—a queer face—rather like De Chauxville; the dogs killed him."

"But why do you not paper the room," asked Etta, with a shiver, "instead of this gloomy panelling? It is so mysterious and creepy. Quite suggestive of secret passages."

"There are no secret passages," answered Paul. "But there is a room behind here. This is the door. I will show it to you presently. I have things in there I want to show you. I keep all my medicines and appliances in there. It is our secret surgery and office. In that room the Charity League was organised."

Etta turned away suddenly and went to the narrow window, where she sat on a low window-seat, looking down into the snowclad depths.

"I did not know you were a doctor," she said.

"I doctor the peasants," replied Paul, "in a rough and ready way. I took my degree on purpose. But, of course, they do not know that it is I; they

think I am a doctor from Moscow. I put on an old coat and wear a scarf, so that they cannot see my face. I only go to them at night. It would never do for the Government to know that we attempt to do good to the peasants. We have to keep it a secret even from the people themselves. And they hate us. They groan and hoot when we drive through the village. But they never attempt to do us any harm; they are too much afraid of us."

When Etta rose and came towards him her face was colourless.

"Let me see this room," she said.

He opened the door and followed her into the apartment, which has already been described. Here he told further bald details of the work he had attempted to do. It is to be feared that he made neither an interesting nor a romantic story of it. There were too many details—too much statistic, and no thrilling realism whatever. The experiences of a youthful curate in Bethnal Green would have made high tragedy beside the tale that this man told his wife of the land upon which God has assuredly laid His curse—Aceldama, the field of blood.

Etta listened, and, despite herself, she became interested. She was sitting in the chair usually occupied by Steinmetz. There was a faint aroma of

tobacco smoke. The atmosphere of the room was manly and energetic.

Paul showed her his simple stores of medicine —the old coat, saturated with disinfectants, which had become the recognised outward sign of the Moscow Doctor.

"And do other people, other noblemen, try to do this sort of thing too?" asked Etta at length.

"Catrina Lanovitch does," replied Paul.

"What! the girl with the hair?"

"Yes," answered Paul. He had never noticed Catrina's hair. Etta's appraising eye had seen more in one second than Paul had perceived in twenty years.

"Yes," he answered. "But, of course, she is handicapped."

"By her appearance?"

"No; by her circumstances. Her name is sufficient to handicap her every movement in this country. But she does a great deal. She—she found me out, confound her!"

Etta had risen; she was looking curiously at the cupboard where Paul's infected clothes were hanging. He had forbidden her to go near it. She turned and looked at him.

"Found you out! How?" she asked, with a queer smile.

"Saw through my disguise."

"Yes—she would do that!" said Etta aloud to herself.

"What is this door?" she asked, after a pause.

"It leads to an inner room," replied Paul, "where Steinmetz usually works."

He passed in front of her and opened the door. As he was doing so Etta went on in the train of her thoughts:

"So Catrina knows."

"Yes."

"And no one else?"

Paul made no answer; for he had passed on into the smaller room, where Steinmetz was seated at a writing-table.

"Except, of course, Herr Steinmetz?" Etta went on interrogatively.

"Madame," said the German, looking up with his pleasant smile, "I know everything."

And he went on writing.

CHAPTER IV.

BLOODHOUNDS.

THE *table d'hôte* of the Hôtel de Moscou at Tver had just begun. The soup had been removed; the diners were engaged in igniting their first cigarette at the candles placed between each pair of them for that purpose. By nature the modern Russian is a dignified and somewhat reserved gentleman. By circumstance he has been schooled into a state of guarded unsociability. If there is a seat at a public table conveniently removed from those occupied by earlier arrivals, the new-comer invariably takes it. In Russia one converses—as in Scotland one jokes—with difficulty.

A Russian *table d'hôte* is therefore anything but hilarious in its tendency. A certain number of grave-faced gentlemen and a few broad-jowled ladies are visibly constrained by the force of circumstance to dine at the same table and hour. There is no pretence that any more sociable and neighbourly motive has brought them together. Indeed, they

each suspect the other of being a German, or a Nihilist, or, worse still, a Government servant. They therefore sit as far apart as possible, and smoke cigarettes between and during the courses, with that self-centred absorption which would be rude, if it were not entirely satisfactory to the average Briton. The ladies, of course, have the same easy method of showing a desire for silence and reflection in a country where nurses carrying infants usually smoke in the streets, and where a dainty confectioner's assistant places her cigarette between her lips in order to leave her hands free for the service of her customers.

The *table d'hôte* of the Hôtel de Moscou at Tver was no exception to the general rule. In Russia, by the way, there are no exceptions to general rules. The personal habits of the native of Cronstadt differ in no way from those of the Czar's subject living in Petropavlovsk, eight thousand miles away.

Around the long table of the host were seated, at respectable intervals, a dozen or more gentlemen, who gazed stolidly at each other from time to time, while the host himself smiled broadly upon them all from that end of the room where the lift and the smell of cooking exercise their calling—the one to spoil the appetite, the other to pander to it when spoilt.

Of these dozen gentlemen we have only to deal with one—a man of broad, high forehead, of colourless eyes, of a mask-like face, who consumed what was put before him with as little noise as possible. Known in Paris as "Ce bon Vassili" was this traveller. But in Paris one does not always use the word *bon* in its English sense of "good."

Monsieur Vassili was evidently desirous of attracting as little attention as circumstances would allow. He was obviously doing his best to look like one who travelled in the interest of braid or buttons. Moreover, when Claude de Chauxville entered the *table d'hôte* room he concealed whatever surprise he may have felt behind a cloud of cigarette smoke. Through the same blue haze he met the Frenchman's eye, a moment later, without the faintest twinkle of recognition.

These two worthies went through the weird courses provided by a cook professing a knowledge of French *cuisine* without taking any compromising notice of each other. When the meal was over Vassili inscribed the number of his bedroom in large figures on the label of his bottle of St. Emilion—after the manner of wise commercial travellers in continental hotels. He subsequently turned the bottle round so that Claude de Chauxville could scarcely

fail to read the number, and with a vague and general bow he left the room.

In his apartment the genial Vassili threw more wood into the stove, drew forward the two regulation armchairs, and lighted all the candles. He then rang the bell and ordered liqueurs. There was evidently something in the nature of an entertainment about to take place in apartment number forty-four of the Hôtel de Moscou.

Before long a discreet knock announced the arrival of the expected visitor.

"Entrez!" cried Vassili; and De Chauxville stood before him with a smile which in French is called *crâne.*

"A pleasure," said Vassili behind his wooden face, "that I did not anticipate in Tver."

"And consequently one that carries its own mitigation. An unanticipated pleasure, *mon ami,* is always inopportune. I make no doubt that you were sorry to see me."

"On the contrary. Will you sit?"

"I can hardly believe," went on De Chauxville, taking the proffered chair, "that my appearance was opportune—on the principle, ha! ha! that a flower growing out of place is a weed. Gentlemen of the—eh—Home Office prefer, I know, to travel quietly!"

He spread out his expressive hands as if smoothing the path of Monsieur Vassili through this stony world. "Incognito," he added guilelessly.

"One does not publish one's name from the housetops," replied the Russian, with a glimmer of pride in his eyes, "especially if it happen to be not quite obscure; but between friends, my dear Baron —between friends."

"Yes. Then what are you doing in Tver?" inquired De Chauxville, with engaging frankness.

"Ah, that is a long story. But I will tell you—never fear—I will tell you on the usual terms."

"Viz.?" inquired the Frenchman, lighting a cigarette.

Vassili accepted the match with a bow, and did likewise. He blew a guileless cloud of smoke towards the dingy ceiling.

"Exchange, my dear Baron, exchange."

"Oh, certainly," replied De Chauxville, who knew that Vassili was in all probability fully informed as to his movements, past and prospective. "I am going to visit some old friends in this Government—the Lanovitches, at Thors."

"Ah!"

"You know them?"

Vassili raised his shoulders and made a little

gesture with his cigarette, as much as to say, "Why ask?"

De Chauxville looked at his companion keenly. He was wondering whether this man knew that he—Claude de Chauxville—loved Etta Howard-Alexis, and consequently hated her husband. He was wondering how much or how little this impenetrable individual knew and suspected.

"I have always said," observed Vassili suddenly, "that for unmitigated impertinence give me a diplomatist."

"Ah! And what would you desire that I should, for the same commodity, give you now?"

"A woman."

There was a short silence in the room while these two birds of a feather reflected.

Suddenly Vassili tapped himself on the chest with his forefinger.

"It was I," he said, "who crushed that very dangerous movement—the Charity League."

"I know it."

"A movement, my dear Baron, to educate the moujik, if you please. To feed him and clothe him, and teach him—to be discontented with his lot. To raise him up and make a man of him. Pah! He is a beast. Let him be treated as such. Let him

work. If he will not work, let him starve and die."

"The man who cannot contribute towards the support of his superiors is superfluous," said De Chauxville glibly.

"Precisely. Now, my dear Baron, listen to me!" The genial Vassili leant forward and tapped with one finger on the knee of De Chauxville, as if knocking at the door of his attention.

"I am all ears, *mon bon Monsieur,*" replied the Frenchman, rather coldly. He had just been reflecting that, after all, he did not want any favour from Vassili for the moment, and the manner of the latter was verging on the familiar.

"The woman—who—sold—me—the Charity League papers dined at my house in Paris—a fortnight ago," said Vassili, with a staccato tap on his companion's knee by way of emphasis to each word.

"Then, my friend, I cannot—congratulate—you—on the society—in—which you move," replied De Chauxville, mimicking his manner.

"Bah! She was a princess!"

"A princess?"

"Yes, of your acquaintance, Monsieur le Baron! And she came to my house with her—eh—husband—the Prince Paul Howard-Alexis."

This was news indeed. De Chauxville leant back and passed his slim, white hand across his brow with a slow pressure, as if wiping some writing from a slate, as if his forehead bore the inscription of his thoughts, and he was wiping it away. And the thoughts he thus concealed—who can count them? For thoughts are the quickest, and the longest, and the saddest things of this life. The first was that if he had known this three months earlier he could have made Etta marry him. And that thought had a thousand branches. With Etta for his wife he might have been a different man. One can never tell what the effect of an acquired desire may be. One can only judge by analogy, and it would seem that frustrated desire makes villains.

But the news, coming thus too late, only served an evil purpose. For in that moment Claude de Chauxville saw Paul's secrets given to him, Paul's wealth meted out to him, Paul in exile, Paul dead in Siberia, where death comes easily, Paul's widow Claude de Chauxville's wife. He wiped all the thoughts away, and showed to Vassili a face that was as composed and impertinent as usual.

"You said 'her—eh—husband,'" he observed. "Why? Why did you add that little 'eh,' my friend?"

Vassili rose and walked to the door that led through into his bedroom from the salon in which they were sitting. It was possible to enter the bedroom from another door and overhear any conversation that might be passing in the sitting-room. The investigation was apparently satisfactory, for the Russian came back. But he did not sit down. Instead, he stood leaning against the tall china stove.

"Needless to tell you," he observed, "the antecedents of the—Princess."

"Quite needless."

"Married seven years ago to Charles Sydney Bamborough," promptly giving the information which was not wanted.

De Chauxville nodded.

"Where is Sydney Bamborough?" asked Vassili, with his mask-like smile.

"Dead," replied the other quietly.

"Prove it."

De Chauxville looked up sharply. The cigarette dropped from his fingers to the floor. His face was yellow and drawn, with a singular tremble of the lips, which were twisted to one side.

"Good God!" he whispered hoarsely.

There was only one thought in his mind—a sudden, wild desire to rise up and stand by Etta

against the whole world. Verily we cannot tell what love may make of us, whither it may lead us. We only know that it never leaves us as it found us.

Then, leaning quietly against the stove, Vassili stated his case.

"Rather more than a year ago," he said, "I received an offer of the papers connected with a great scheme in this country. After certain inquiries had been made I accepted the offer. I paid a fabulous price for the papers. They were brought to me by a lady wearing a thick veil—a lady I had never seen before. I asked no questions, and paid her the money. It subsequently transpired that the papers had been stolen, as you perhaps know, from the house of Count Stepán Lanovitch—the house to which you happen to be going—at Thors. Well, that is all ancient history. It is to be supposed that the papers were stolen by Sydney Bamborough, who brought them here—probably to this hotel, where his wife was staying. He handed her the papers, and she conveyed them to me in Paris. But before she reached Petersburg they would have been missed by Stepán Lanovitch, who would naturally suspect the man who had been staying in his house, Bamborough—a man with a doubtful reputation in the diplomatic world, a professed doer of dirty jobs.

Foreseeing this, and knowing that the League was a big thing, with a few violent members on its books, Sydney Bamborough did not attempt to leave Russia by the western route. He probably decided to go through Nijni, down the Volga, acrross the Caspian, and so on to Persia and India. You follow me?"

"Perfectly!" answered De Chauxville coldly.

"I have been here a week," went on the Russian spy, "making inquiries. I have worked the whole affair out, link by link, till the evening when the husband and wife parted. She went west with the papers. Where did he go?"

De Chauxville picked up the cigarette, looked at it curiously, as at a relic—the relic of the moment of strongest emotion through which he had ever passed—and threw it into the ash-tray. He did not speak, and after a moment Vassili went on, stating his case with lawyer-like clearness.

"A body was found on the steppe," he said; "the body of a middle-aged man dressed as a small commercial traveller would dress. He had a little money in his pocket, but nothing to identify him. He was buried here in Tver by the police, who received their information by an anonymous postcard posted in Tver. The person who had found the body did not want to be implicated in any inquiry.

Now, who found the body? Who was the dead man? Mrs. Sydney Bamborough has assumed that the dead man was her husband; on the strength of that assumption she has become a princess. A frail foundation upon which to build up her fortunes, eh?"

"How did she know that the body had been found?" asked De Chauxville, perceiving the weak point in his companion's chain of argument.

"It was reported shortly in the local newspapers," replied Vassili, "and repeated in one or two continental journals, as the police were of opinion that the man was a foreigner. Anyone watching the newspapers would see it—otherwise the incident might pass unobserved."

"And you think," said De Chauxville, suppressing his excitement with an effort, "that the lady has risked everything upon a supposition?"

"Knowing the lady, I do."

De Chauxville's dull eyes gleamed for a moment with an unwonted light. All the civilisation of the ages will not eradicate the primary instincts of men —and one of these, in good and bad alike, is to protect women. The Frenchmen bit the end of his cigarette, and angrily wiped the tobacco from his lips.

"She may have information of which you are ignorant," he suggested.

"Precisely. It is that particular point which gives me trouble at the present moment. It is that that I wish to discover."

De Chauxville looked up coolly. He saw his advantage.

"Hence your sudden flow of communicativeness?" he said.

Vassili nodded.

"You cannot find out for yourself, so you seek my help?" went on the Frenchman.

Again the Russian nodded his head.

"And your price?" said De Chauxville, drawing in his feet and leaning forward, apparently to study the pattern of the carpet. The action concealed his face. He was saving Etta, and he was ashamed of himself.

"When you have the information you may name your own price," said the Russian coldly.

There was a long silence. Before speaking De Chauxville turned and took a glass of liqueur from the table. His hand was not quite steady. He raised the glass quickly and emptied it. Then he rose and looked at his watch. The silence was a compact.

"When the lady dined with you in Paris, did she recognise you?" he asked.

"Yes; but she did not know that I recognised her."

For the moment they both overlooked Steinmetz.

De Chauxville stood reflecting.

"And your theory," he said, "respecting Sydney Bamborough—what is it?"

"If he got away to Nijni and the Volga, it is probable that he is in Eastern Siberia or in Persia at this moment. He has not had time to get right across Asia yet."

De Chauxville moved towards the door. With his fingers on the handle he paused again.

"I leave early to-morrow morning," he said.

Vassili nodded, or rather he bowed, in his grand way.

Then De Chauxville went out of the room. They did not shake hands. There is sometimes shame among thieves.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE WEB.

"WHAT I propose is that Catrina takes you for a drive, my dear Baron, with her two ponies."

The Countess had taken very good care to refrain from making this proposal to Catrina alone. She was one of those mothers who rule their daughters by springing surprises upon them in a carefully-selected company where the daughter is not free to reply.

De Chauxville bowed with outspread hands.

"If it will not bore Mademoiselle," he replied.

The Countess looked at her daughter with an unctuous smile, as if to urge her to make the most of this opportunity. It was one of the Countess's chief troubles that she could not by hook or crook involve Catrina in any sort of a love intrigue. She was the sort of mother who would have preferred to hear scandal about her daughter to hearing nothing.

"If it will not freeze Monsieur," replied Catrina, with uncompromising honesty.

De Chauxville laughed in his frank way.

"I am not afraid of coldness—of the atmosphere, Mademoiselle," he replied. "I am most anxious to see your beautiful country. It was quite dark during the last hour of my journey last night, and I had snow-sleepiness. I saw nothing."

"You will see nothing but snow," said Catrina.

"Which is like the reserve of a young girl," added the Frenchman. "It keeps warm that which is beneath it."

"You need not be afraid with Catrina," chimed in the Countess, nodding and becking in a manner that clearly showed her assumption to herself of some vague compliment. "She drives beautifully. She is not nervous in that way. I have never seen anyone drive like her."

"I have no doubt," said De Chauxville, "that Mademoiselle's hands are firm, although so small."

The Countess was charmed —- and showed it. She frowned at Catrina, who remained grave and looked at the clock.

"When would you like to go?" she asked De Chauxville, with that complete absence of affectation which characterises the attitude of Russian women towards men.

"Am I not at your service—now and always?" responded the gallant Baron.

"I hope not," replied Catrina quietly. "There are occasions when I have no use for you. Shall we say eleven o'clock?"

"With pleasure. Then I will go and write my letters now," said the Baron, quitting the room.

"A charming man!" ejaculated the Countess, before the door was well closed.

"A fool," corrected Catrina.

"I do not think you can say that, dear," sighed the Countess, more in sorrow than in anger.

"A clever one," answered Catrina. "There is a difference. The clever ones are the worst."

The Countess shrugged her shoulders hopelessly, and Catrina left the room. She went upstairs to her own little den, where the piano stood. It was the only room in the house that was not too warm, for here the window was occasionally opened—a proceeding which the Countess considered scarcely short of criminal.

Catrina began to play, feverishly, nervously, with all the weird force of her nature. She was like a very sick person seeking a desperate remedy—racing against time. It was her habit to take her breaking heart thus to the great masters, to interpret their thoughts in their music, wielding their melodies to the needs of her own sorrow. She only had half an

hour. Of late music had failed her a little. It had not given her the comfort she had usually extracted from solitude and the piano. She was in a dangerous humour. She was afraid of trusting herself to De Chauxville. The time fled, and her humour did not change. She was still playing when the door opened, and the Countess stood before her flushed and angry, either or both being the effect of stairs upon emotion.

"Catrina!" the elder lady exclaimed. "The sleigh is at the door, and the Count is waiting. I cannot tell what you are thinking of. It is not everybody who would be so attentive to you. Just look at your hair. Why can't you dress like other girls?"

"Because I am not made like other girls," replied Catrina—and who knows what bitterness of reproach there was in such an answer from daughter to mother?

"Hush, child!" replied the Countess, whose anger usually took the form of personal abuse. "You are as the good God made you."

"Then the good God must have made me in the dark," cried Catrina, flinging out of the room.

"She will be down directly," said the Countess Lanovitch to De Chauxville, whom she found smok-

ing a cigarette in the hall. "She naturally—he! he! —wishes to make a careful toilet."

De Chauxville bowed gravely, without committing himself to any observation, and offered her a cigarette, which she accepted. Having achieved his purpose, he did not now propose to convey the impression that he admired Catrina.

In a few moments the girl appeared, drawing on her fur gloves. Before the door was opened the Countess discreetly retired to the enervating warmth of her own apartments.

Catrina gathered up the reins and gave a little cry, at which the ponies leapt forward, and in a whirl of driven snow the sleigh glided off between the pines.

At first there was no opportunity of conversation, for the ponies were fresh and troublesome. The road which they were traversing had not been beaten down by the passage of previous sleighs, so that the powdery snow rose up like dust and filled the eyes and mouth.

"It will be better presently," gasped Catrina, wrestling with her fractious little Tartar thoroughbreds, "when we get out on to the high road."

De Chauxville sat quite still. If he felt any misgiving as to her power of mastering her team he kept

it to himself. There was a subtle difference in his manner towards Catrina when they were alone together, a suggestion of *camaraderie,* of a common interest and a common desire of which she was conscious without being able to put definite meaning to it.

It annoyed and alarmed her. While giving her full attention to the management of the sleigh, she was beginning to dread the first words of this man, who was merely wielding a cheap power acquired in the shady course of his career. There is nothing so disarming as the assumed air of intimate knowledge of one's private thoughts and actions. De Chauxville assumed this air with a skill against which Catrina's dogged strength of character was incapable of battling. His manner conveyed the impression that he knew more of Catrina's inward thoughts than any other living being, and she was simple enough to be frightened into the conclusion that she had betrayed herself to him. There is no simpler method of discovering a secret than to ignore its existence.

It is possible that De Chauxville became aware of Catrina's sidelong glances of anxiety in his direction. He may have divined that silence was more effective than speech.

He sat looking straight in front of him, as if too

deeply absorbed in his own thoughts to take even a passing interest in the scenery.

"Why did you come here?" asked Catrina suddenly.

De Chauxville seemed to awake from a reverie. He turned and looked at her in assumed surprise. They were on the high road now, where the snow was beaten down, so conversation was easy.

"But—to see you, Mademoiselle."

"I am not *that* sort of girl," answered Catrina coldly. "I want the truth."

De Chauxville gave a short laugh and looked at her.

"Prophets and kings have sought the truth, Mademoiselle, and have not found it," he said lightly.

Catrina made no answer to this. Her ponies required considerable attention. Also, there are some minds that, like large banking houses, do not deal in small change. That which passes in or out of such minds has its own standard of importance. Such people are not of much use in these days, when we like to touch things lightly, adorning a tale but pointing no moral.

"I would ask you to believe that your society was one incentive to make me accept the Countess's kind hospitality," the Frenchman observed after a pause.

"And?"

De Chauxville looked at her. He had not met many women of solid intellect.

"And?" repeated Catrina.

"I have others, of course."

Catrina gave a little nod and waited.

"I wish to be near Alexis," added De Chauxville.

Catrina was staring straight in front of her. Her face had acquired a habit of hardening at the mention of Paul's name. It was stone-like now, and set. Perhaps she might have forgiven him if he had loved her once, if only for a little while. She might have forgiven him, if only for the remembrance of that little while. But Paul had always been a man of set purpose, and such men are cruel. Even for her sake, even for the sake of his own vanity, he had never pretended to love Catrina. He had never mistaken gratified vanity for dawning love, as millions of men do.

"Do you love him so?" asked Catrina, with a grim smile distorting her strong face.

"As much as you, Mademoiselle," replied De Chauxville.

Catrina started. She was not sure that she hated Paul. Towards Etta, there was no mistake in her

feeling, and this was so strong that, like an electric current, there was enough of it to pass through the wife and reach the husband.

Passion, like character, does not grow in crowded places. In great cities men are all more or less alike. It is only in solitary abodes that strong natures grow up in their own way. Catrina had attained womanhood in one of the solitary places of the earth. She had no facile axiom, no powerful precedent to guide her every step through life. The woman who was in daily contact with her was immeasurably beneath her in mental power, in force of character, in those possibilities of love or hatred which go to make a strong life for good or for evil. By the side of her daughter the Countess Lanovitch was as the willow, swayed by every wind, in the neighbourhood of the oak, crooked and still and strong.

"In Petersburg you pledged yourself to help me," said De Chauxville. And although she knew that in the letter this was false, she did not contradict him. "I came here to claim fulfilment of your promise."

The hard blue eyes beneath the fur cap stared straight in front of them. Catrina seemed to be driving like one asleep, for she noted nothing by the roadside. So far as eye could reach over the snow-

clad plain, through the silent pines, these two were alone in a white, dead world of their own. Catrina never drove with bells. There was no sound beyond the high-pitched drone of the steel runners over the powdery snow. They were alone; unseen, unheard save of that Ear that listens in the waste places of the world.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Oh, not very much," answered De Chauxville —a cautious man who knew a woman's humour. Catrina driving a pair of ponies in the clear sharp air of Central Russia, and Catrina playing the piano in the enervating, flower-scented atmosphere of a drawing-room, were two different women. De Chauxville was not the man to mistake the one for the other.

"Not very much, Mademoiselle," he answered. "I should like Madame la Comtesse to invite the whole Osterno party to dine, and sleep, perhaps, if one may suggest it."

Catrina wanted this too. She wanted to torture herself with the sight of Etta, beautiful, self-confident, carelessly cognisant of Paul's love. She wanted to see Paul look at his wife with the open admiration which she had set down as something else than love —something immeasurably beneath love as Catrina

understood that passion. Her soul, brooding under a weight of misery, was ready to welcome any change, should it only mean a greater misery.

"I can manage that," she said, "if they will come. It was a prearranged matter that there should be a bear hunt in our forests."

"That will do," answered De Chauxville reflectively; "in a few days, perhaps, if it suits the Countess."

Catrina made no reply. After a pause she spoke again in her strange, jerky way.

"What will you gain by it?" she asked.

De Chauxville shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows?" he answered. "There are many things I want to know; many questions which can be answered only by one's own observation. I want to see them together. Are they happy?"

Catrina's face hardened.

"If there is a God in heaven, and He hears our prayers, they ought not to be," she replied curtly.

"She looked happy enough in Petersburg," said the Frenchman, who never told the truth for its own sake. Whenever he thought that Catrina's hatred needed stimulation he mentioned Etta's name.

"There are other questions in my mind," he

went on, "some of which you can answer, Mademoiselle, if you care to."

Catrina's face expressed no great willingness to oblige.

"The Charity League," said De Chauxville, looking at her keenly; "I have always had a feeling of curiosity respecting it. Was, for instance, our friend the Prince Pavlo implicated in that unfortunate affair?"

Catrina flushed suddenly. She did not take her eyes from the ponies. She was conscious of the unwonted colour in her cheeks, which was slowly dying away beneath her companion's relentless gaze.

"You need not trouble to reply, Mademoiselle," said De Chauxville, with his dark smile; "I am answered."

Catrina pulled the ponies up with a jerk, and proceeded to turn their willing heads towards home. She was alarmed and disturbed. Nothing seemed to be safe from the curiosity of this man, no secret secure, no prevarication of the slightest avail.

"There are other questions in my mind," said De Chauxville quietly, "but not now. Mademoiselle is no doubt tired."

He leant back, and when at length he spoke it

was to give utterance to the trite commonplace of which he made a conversational study.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE CASTLE OF THORS.

A WEEK later Catrina, watching from the window of her own small room, saw Paul lift Etta from the sleigh, and the sight made her clench her hands until the knuckles shone like polished ivory.

She turned and looked at herself in the mirror. No one knew how she had tried one dress after another since luncheon, alone in her two rooms, having sent her maid downstairs. No one knew the bitterness in this girl's heart as she contemplated her own reflection.

She went slowly downstairs to the long, dimly-lighted drawing-room. As she entered she heard her mother's voice.

"Yes, Princess," the Countess was saying, "it is a quaint old house; little more than a fortified farm, I know. But my husband's family were always strange. They seem always to have ignored the little comforts and elegancies of life."

"It is most interesting," answered Etta's voice, and Catrina stepped forward into the light.

Formal greetings were exchanged, and Catrina saw Etta look anxiously towards the door through which she had just come. She thought that she was looking for her husband. But it was Claude de Chauxville for whose appearance Etta was waiting.

Paul and Steinmetz entered at the same moment by another door, and Catrina, who was talking to Maggie in English, suddenly stopped.

"Ah, Catrina," said Paul, "we have broken new ground for you. There was no track from here to Osterno through the forest. I made one this afternoon, so you have no excuse for remaining away now."

"Thank you," answered Catrina, withdrawing her cold hand hurriedly from his friendly grasp.

"Miss Delafield," went on Paul, "admires our country as much as you do."

"I was just telling Mademoiselle," said Maggie.

Paul nodded, and left them together.

"Yes," the Countess was saying at the other end of the gloomy room; "yes, we are greatly attached to Thors: Catrina, perhaps, more than I. I have some happy associations, and many sorrowful ones. But then—*Mon Dieu!*—how isolated we are!"

"It is rather far from—anywhere," acceded Etta, who was not attending, although she appeared to be interested.

"Far! Princess, I often wonder how Paris and Thors can be in the same world! Before our—our troubles we used to live in Paris a portion of the year. At least I did, while my poor husband travelled about. He had a hobby, you know, poor man! Humanity was his hobby. I have always found that men who seek to do good to their fellows are never thanked. Have you noticed that? The human race is not grateful *en gros*. There is a little gratitude in the individual, but none in the race."

"None," answered Etta absently.

"It was so with the Charity League," went on the Countess volubly. She paused and looked round with her feeble eyes.

"We are all friends," she went on; "so it is safe to mention the Charity League, is it not?"

"No," answered Steinmetz from the fireplace; "no, Madame. There is only one friend to whom you may safely mention that."

"Ah! Bad example!" exclaimed the Countess playfully. "You are there! I did not see you enter. And who is that friend?"

"The fair lady who looks at you from your mirror," replied Steinmetz, with a face of stone.

The Countess laughed, and as usual shook her cap to one side.

"Well," she said, "I can do no harm in talking of such things, as I know nothing of them. My poor husband—my poor mistaken Stepán—placed no confidence in his wife. And now he is in Siberia. I believe he works in a bootmaker's shop. I pity the people who wear the boots; but perhaps he only puts in the laces. You hear, Paul? He placed no confidence in his wife, and now he is in Siberia. Let that be a warning to you—eh, Princess? I hope he tells you everything."

"Put not your trust in princesses," said Steinmetz from the hearthrug, where he was still warming his hands, for he had driven Maggie over. "It says so in the Bible."

"Princes, profane one!" exclaimed the Countess with a laugh—"princes, not princesses!"

"It may be so. I bow to your superior literary attainments," replied Steinmetz, looking casually and significantly at a pile of yellow-backed foreign novels on a side-table.

"No," the Countess went on, addressing her conversation to Etta; "no, my husband—figure to your-

self, Princess—told me nothing. I never knew that he was implicated in this great scheme. I do not know now who else was concerned in it. It was all so sudden, so unexpected, so terrible. It appears that he kept the papers in this very house—in that room through there. It was his study——-"

"My dear Countess, silence!" interrupted Steinmetz at this moment, breaking into the conversation in his masterful way, and enabling Etta to get away. Catrina at the other end of the room was listening, hard-eyed, breathless. It was the sight of Catrina's face that made Steinmetz go forward. He had not been looking at Catrina, but at Etta, who was perfect in her composure and steady self-control.

"Do you want to enter the boot trade also?" asked Steinmetz cheerfully, in a lowered voice.

"Heaven forbid!" cried the Countess.

"Then let us talk of safer things."

The short twilight was already brooding over the land. The room, lighted only by small square windows, grew darker and darker until Catrina rang for lamps.

"I hate a dark room," she said shortly to Maggie.

When De Chauxville came in, a few minutes later, Catrina was at the piano. The room was brilliantly lighted, and on the table gleamed and

glittered the silver tea things. The intermediate meal had been disposed of, but the samovar had been left alight, as is the habit at Russian afternoon teas.

Catrina looked up when the Frenchman entered, but did not cease playing.

"There is no need for introductions, I think," said the Countess.

"We all know M. de Chauxville," replied Paul quietly, and the two men exchanged a glance.

De Chauxville shook hands with the new-comers, and, while the Countess prepared tea for him, launched into a long description of the preparations for the bear hunt of the following day. He addressed his remarks exclusively to Paul, as between enthusiasts and fellow-sportsmen. Gradually Paul thawed a little, and made one or two suggestions which betrayed a deep knowledge and a dawning interest.

"We shall only be three rifles," said De Chauxville, "Steinmetz, you, and I; and I must ask you to bear in mind the fact that I am no shot—a mere amateur, my dear Prince. The Countess has been good enough to leave the whole matter in my hands. I have seen the keepers, and I have arranged that they come to-night at eleven o'clock to see us and

to report progress. They know of three bears, and are attempting to ring them."

The Frenchman was really full of information and enthusiasm. There were many details upon which he required Paul's advice, and the two men talked together with less constraint than they had hitherto done. De Chauxville had picked up a vast deal of technical matter, and handled his little knowledge with a skill which bade fair to deprive it of its proverbial danger. He presently left Steinmetz and Paul engaged in a controversy with the Countess as to a meeting-place at the luncheon hour.

Maggie and Catrina were at the piano. Etta was looking at a book of photographs.

"A charming house, Princess," said De Chauxville, in a voice that all could hear while the music happened to be soft. But Catrina's music was more remarkable for strength than for softness.

"Charming," replied Etta.

The music rose into a swelling burst of harmonious chords.

"I must see you, Princess," said De Chauxville.

Etta glanced across the room towards her husband and Steinmetz.

"Alone," added the Frenchman coolly.

Etta turned a page of the album and looked critically into a photograph.

"Must!" she said, with a little frown.

"Must," repeated De Chauxville.

"A word I do not care about," said Etta, with raised eyebrows.

The music was soft again.

"It is ten years since I held a rifle," said De Chauxville. "Ah, Madame, you do not know the excitement. I pity ladies, for they have no sport—no big game."

"Personally, Monsieur," answered Etta, with her bright laugh, "I do not grudge you your big game. Suppose you miss the bear, or whatever it may be?"

"Then," said De Chauxville, with a brave shrug of the shoulders, "it is the turn of the bear. The excitement is his—the laugh is with him."

Catrina's foot was upon the loud pedal again.

"Nevertheless, Madame," said De Chauxville, "I make so bold as to use the word. You perhaps know me well enough to be aware that I am rarely bold unless my ground is sure."

"I should not boast of it," answered Etta; "there is nothing to be proud of. It is easy enough to be bold if you are certain of victory."

"When defeat would be intolerable even a cer-

tain victory requires care! And I cannot afford to lose."

"Lose what?" inquired Etta.

De Chauxville looked at her, but he did not answer. The music was soft again.

"I suppose that at Osterno you set no value upon a bear skin," he said after a pause.

"We have many," admitted Etta. "But I love fur, or trophies of any description. Paul has killed a great deal."

"Ah!"

"Yes," answered Etta, and the music rose again. "I should like to know," she went on, "upon what assumption you make use of a word which does not often—annoy me."

"I have a good memory, Madame. Besides," he paused, looking round the room, "there are associations within these walls which stimulate the memory."

"What do you mean?" asked Etta in a hard voice. The hand holding the album suddenly shook like a leaf in the wind.

De Chauxville had stood upright, his hand at his moustache, after the manner of a man whose small talk is exhausted. It would appear that he was wondering how he could gracefully get away from the Princess to pay his *devoirs* elsewhere.

"I cannot tell you now," he answered; "Catrina is watching us across the piano. You must beware, Madame, of those cold blue eyes."

He moved away, going towards the piano, where Maggie was standing behind Catrina's chair. He was like a woman, inasmuch as he could not keep away from his failures.

"Are you advanced, Miss Delafield?" he asked, with his deferential little bow. "Are you modern?"

"I am neither; I have no desire for even the cheapest form of notoriety. Why do you ask?" replied Maggie.

"I was merely wondering whether we were to count you among our rifles to-morrow. One never knows what ladies will do next; not ladies—I apologise—women. I suppose it is those who are not by birth ladies who aspire to the proud name of women. The modern Woman—with a capital W—is not a lady—*n'est-ce pas?*"

"She does not mind your abuse, Monsieur," laughed Maggie. "So long as you do not ignore her, she is happy. But you may set your mind at rest as regards to-morrow. I have never let off a gun in my life, and I am sensible enough not to begin on bears."

De Chauxville made a suitable reply, and re-

mained by the piano talking to the two young ladies until Etta rose and came towards them. He then crossed to the other side of the room and engaged Paul in the discussion of further plans for the morrow.

It was soon time to dress for dinner, and Etta was forced to forego the opportunity she sought to exchange a word alone with De Chauxville. That astute gentleman carefully avoided allowing her this opportunity. He knew the value of a little suspense.

During dinner and afterwards, when at length the gentlemen came to the drawing-room, the conversation was of a sporting nature. Bears, bear-hunting, and bear stories held supreme sway. More than once De Chauxville returned to this subject. Twice he avoided Etta.

In some ways this man was courageous. He delayed giving Etta her opportunity until there was a question of retiring to bed in view of the early start required by the next day's arrangements. It had been finally settled that the three younger ladies should drive over to a woodman's cottage at the far end of the forest, where luncheon was to be served. While this item of the programme was arranged, De Chauxville looked straight at Etta across the table.

At length she had the chance afforded to her, deliberately, by De Chauxville.

"What did you mean?" she asked at once.

"I have received information which, had I known it three months ago, would have made a difference in your life."

"What difference?"

"I should have been your husband instead of that thick-headed giant."

Etta laughed, but her lips were for the moment colourless.

"When am I to see you alone?"

Etta shrugged her shoulders. She had plenty of spirit.

"Please do not be dramatic or mysterious; I am tired. Good-night."

She rose and concealed a simulated yawn.

De Chauxville looked at her with his sinister smile, and Etta suddenly saw the resemblance which Paul had noted between this man and the grinning mask of the lynx in the smoking-room at Osterno.

"When?" repeated he.

Etta shrugged her shoulders.

"I wish to speak to you about the—Charity League," said De Chauxville.

Etta's eyes dilated. She made a step or two away from him, but she came back.

"I shall not go to the luncheon to-morrow, if you care to leave the hunt early."

De Chauxville bowed.

CHAPTER VII.

ANGLO-RUSSIAN.

At bedtime Catrina went to Maggie's room with her to see that she had all that she could desire. A wood fire was burning brightly in the open French stove; the room was lighted by lamps. It was warm and cheery. A second door led to the little music-room which Catrina had made her own, and beyond was her bedroom.

Maggie had assured her hostess that she had everything that she could wish, and that she did not desire the services of Catrina's maid. But the Russian girl still lingered. She was slow to make friends—not shy, but diffident and suspicious. Her friendship, once secured, was a thing worth possessing. She was inclined to bestow it upon this self-contained English girl. In such matters the length of an acquaintance goes for nothing. A long acquaint-

anceship does not necessarily mean friendship—one being the result of circumstance, the other of selection.

"The Princess knows Russian?" said Catrina suddenly.

She was standing near the dressing-table, where she had been absently attending to the candles. She wheeled round and looked at Maggie, who was sitting on a low chair near the fire. Maggie was sorry for the loneliness of this girl's life. She did not want her to go away just yet. There was another chair by the fire, inviting Catrina to indulge in those maiden confidences which attach themselves to slippers and hair brushings.

Maggie looked up with a smile which slowly ebbed away. Catrina's remark was of the nature of a defiance. Her half-diffident *rôle* of hostess was suddenly laid aside.

"No; she does not," answered the English girl.

Catrina came forward, standing over her companion, looking down at her with eyes full of antagonism.

"Excuse me. I saw her understand a remark I made to one of the servants. She was not careful. I saw it distinctly."

"I think you must be mistaken," answered Maggie

quietly. "She has been in Russia before for a few weeks; but she did not learn the language. She told me so herself. Why should she pretend not to know Russian if she does?"

Catrina made no answer. She sat heavily down in the vacant chair. Her attitudes were uncouth and strong—a perpetual source of tribulation to the Countess. She sat with her elbow on her knee, staring into the fire.

"I did not mean to hate her; I did not want to," she said. "If it had been you, I should not have hated you."

Maggie's clear eyes wavered for a moment. A faint colour rose to her face. She leant back so that the firelight did not reach her. There was a silence, during which Maggie unclasped a bracelet with a little snap of the spring. Catrina did not hear the sound. She heard nothing. She did not appear to be aware of her surroundings. Maggie unclasped another bracelet noisily. She was probably regretting her former kindness of manner. Catrina had come too near.

"Are you not judging rather hastily?" suggested Maggie in a measured voice, which heightened the contrast between the two. "I find it takes some

time to discover whether one likes or dislikes new acquaintances."

"Yes; but you English are so cold and deliberate. You do not know what it is to hate—or to care."

"Perhaps we do," said Maggie; "but we say less about it."

Catrina turned and looked at her with a queer smile.

"Less!" she laughed. "Nothing—you say nothing. Paul is the same. I have seen. I know. You have said nothing since you came to Thors. You have talked and laughed; you have given opinions; you have spoken of many things, but you have said nothing. You are the same as Paul—one never knows. I know nothing about you. But I like you. You are her cousin?"

"Yes."

"And I hate her."

Maggie laughed. She was quite steady and loyal.

"When you get to know her you will change, perhaps," she said.

"Perhaps I know her now better than you do!"

Maggie laughed in her cheery, practical way.

"That seems hardly likely, considering that I have known her since we were children."

Catrina shrugged her shoulders in an honest if somewhat mannerless refusal to discuss the side issue. She returned to the main question with characteristic stubbornness.

"I shall always hate her," she said. "I am sorry she is your cousin. I shall always regret that, and I shall always hate her. There is something wrong about her—something none of you know except Karl Steinmetz. He knows everything—Herr Steinmetz."

"He knows a great deal," admitted Maggie.

"Yes; and that is why he is sad. Is it not so?"

Catrina sat staring into the fire, her strange, earnest eyes almost fierce in their concentration.

"Did she pretend that she loved him at first?" she asked suddenly.

Receiving no answer, she looked up and fixed her searching gaze on the face of her companion. Maggie was looking straight in front of her in the direction of the fire, but not with eyes focussed to see anything so near at hand. She bore the scrutiny without flinching. As soon as Catrina's eyes were averted the mask-like stillness of her features relaxed.

"She does not take that trouble now," added the Russian girl in reply to her own question. "Did you see her to-night when we were at the piano? Monsieur de Chauxville was talking to her. They were keeping two conversations going at the same time. I could see by their faces. They said different things when the music was loud. I hate her. She is not true to Paul. Monsieur de Chauxville knows something about her. They have something in common which is not known to Paul or to any of us! Why do you not speak? Why do you sit staring into the fire with your lips so close together?"

"Because I do not think that we shall gain anything by discussing Paul and his wife. It is no business of ours."

Catrina laughed—a lamentable, mirthless laugh.

"That is because she is your cousin; and he—he is nothing to you. You do not care whether he is happy or not."

Catrina had turned upon her companion fiercely. Maggie swung round in her chair to pick up her bracelets, which had slipped from her knees to the floor.

"You exaggerate things," she said quietly. "I see no reason to suppose that Paul is unhappy. It

is because you have taken this unreasoning dislike to her."

She took a long time to collect three bracelets. Then she rose and placed them on the dressing-table.

"Do you want me to go?" asked Catrina in her blunt way.

"No," answered Maggie, civilly enough; but she extracted a couple of hair-pins rather obviously.

Catrina heeded the voice and not the action.

"You English are all alike," she said. "You hold one at arm's length. I suppose there is someone in England for whom you care—who is out of all this—away from all the troubles of Russia. This has nothing to do with your life. It is only a passing incident—a few weeks to be forgotten when you go back. I wonder what he is like—the man in England. You need not tell me. I am not curious in that way. I am not asking you to tell me. I am just wondering. For I know there is someone. I knew it when I first saw you. You are so quiet, and settled, and self-contained—like a person who has played a game and knows for certain that it is lost or won, and does not want to play again. Your hair is very pretty; you are very pretty, you quiet English girl.

I wonder what you think about behind your steady eyes."

"I," said Maggie, with a little laugh. "Oh—I think about my dresses, and the new fashions, and parties, and all the things that girls do think of."

Catrina shook her head. She looked stubborn and unconvinced. Then suddenly she changed the subject.

"Do you like Monsieur de Chauxville?" she asked.

"No."

"Does Paul like him?"

"I don't know."

Catrina looked up for a moment only. Then her eyes returned to the contemplation of the burning pine-logs.

"I wonder why you will not talk of Paul," she said, in a voice requiring no answer.

Maggie moved rather uneasily. She had her back turned towards Catrina.

"I am afraid I am rather a dull person," she answered. "I have not much to say about anybody."

"And nothing about Paul?" suggested Catrina.

"Nothing. We were talking of Monsieur de Chauxville."

"Yes; I do not understand Monsieur de Chauxville. He seems to me to be the incarnation of insincerity. He poses—even to himself. He is always watching for the effect. I wonder what the effect of himself upon himself may be."

Maggie laughed.

"That is rather complicated," she said. "It requires working out. I think he is deeply impressed with his own astuteness. If he were simpler he would be cleverer."

Catrina was afraid of Claude de Chauxville, and because this was so she stared in wonder at the English girl, who dismissed him from the conversation and her thoughts with a few careless words of contempt. Such a mind as that of Miss Delafield was quite outside the field of De Chauxville's influence, while that Frenchman had considerable power over highly strung and imaginative natures.

Catrina Lanovitch had begun by tolerating him—had proceeded to make the serious blunder of permitting him to be impertinently familiar, and was now exaggerating in her own mind the hold that he had over her. She did not actually dislike him. So few people had taken the trouble or found the expediency of endeavouring to sympathise with her or

understand her nature that she was unconsciously drawn towards this man, whom she now feared.

In exaggerating the power he exercised over herself she naturally exaggerated also his importance in the world and in the lives of those around him. She had imagined him all-powerful; and the first person to whom she mentioned his name dismissed the subject indifferently. Her own entire sincerity had enabled her to detect the insincerity of her ally. She had purposely made mention of the weak spot which she had discovered in order that her observation might be corroborated. And this Maggie had failed to do.

With the slightest encouragement Catrina would have told her companion all that had passed. The sympathy between women is so strong that there is usually only one man who is safe from discussion. In Catrina's case that one man was not Claude de Chauxville. But Maggie Delafield was of different material from this impressionable, impulsive Russian girl. She was essentially British in her capacity for steering a straight personal course through the shoals and quicksands of her neighbours' affairs, as also in the firm grip she held upon her own thoughts. She was by no means prepared to open her mind to the first comer, and in her somewhat slow-going English

estimate of such matters Catrina was as yet little more than the first comer.

She changed the subject, and they talked for some time on indifferent topics—such topics as have an interest for girls; and who are we that we may despise them? We jeer very grandly at girls' talk, and promptly return to the discussion of our dogs and pipes and clothing.

But Catrina was not happy under this judicious treatment. She had no one in the world to whom she could impart a thousand doubts and questions —a hundred grievances and one great grief. And it was just this one great grief of which Maggie dreaded the mention. She was quite well aware of its existence—had been aware of it for some time. Karl Steinmetz had thrown out one or two vague hints; everything pointed to it. Maggie could hardly be ignorant of the fact that Catrina had grown to womanhood loving Paul.

A score of times Catrina approached the subject, and with imperturbable steadfastness Maggie held to her determination that Paul was not to be discussed by them. She warded, she evaded, she ignored with a skill which baffled the simple Russian. She had a hundred subterfuges—a hundred skilful turns and twists. Where women learn these matters, heaven

only knows! All our experience of the world, our falls and stumbles on the broken road of life, never teach us some things that are known to the veriest school-girl standing on the smoother footpath that women tread.

At last Catrina rose to go. Maggie rose also. Women are relentless where they fight for their own secrets. Maggie morally turned Catrina out of the room. The two girls stood looking at each other for a moment. They had nothing in common. The language in which they understood each other best was the native tongue of neither. Born in different countries, each of a mixed race with no one racial strain in common, neither creed, nor education, nor similarity of thought had aught to draw them together. They looked at each other, and God's hand touched them. They both loved the same man. They did not hate each other.

"Have you everything you want?" asked Catrina.

The question was startling. Catrina's speech was ever abrupt. At first Maggie did not understand.

"Yes, thanks," she answered. "I am very tired. I suppose it is the snow."

"Yes," said Catrina mechanically; "it is the snow."

She went towards the door, and there she paused.

"Does Paul love her?" she asked abruptly.

Maggie made no answer; and, as was her habit, Catrina replied to her own question.

"You know he does not—you know he does not!" she said.

Then she went out, without waiting for an answer, closing the door behind her. The closed door heard the reply.

"It will not matter much," said Maggie, "so long as he never finds it out."

CHAPTER VIII.

WOLF!

THE Countess Lanovitch never quitted her own apartments before mid-day. She had acquired a Parisian habit of being invisible until luncheon-time. The two girls left the Castle of Thors in a sleigh with one attendant at ten o'clock in order to reach the hut, selected for luncheon, by mid-day. Etta did not accompany them. She had a slight head-ache.

At eleven o'clock Claude de Chauxville returned

alone, on horseback. After the sportsmen had separated, each to gain his prearranged position in the forest, he had tripped over his rifle, seriously injuring the delicate sighting mechanism. He found (he told the servant who opened the door for him) that he had just time to return for another rifle before the operation of closing in on the bears was to begin.

"If Madame the Princess was visible," he went on, "would the servant tell her that Monsieur de Chauxville was waiting in the library to assure her that there was absolutely no danger to be anticipated in the day's sport?" The Princess, it would appear, was absurdly anxious about the welfare of her husband—an experienced hunter and a dead shot.

Claude de Chauxville then went to the library, where he waited, booted, spurred, rifle in hand, for Etta.

After a lapse of five minutes or more the door was opened, and Etta came leisurely into the room.

"Well?" she inquired indifferently.

De Chauxville bowed. He walked past her and closed the door, which she happened to have left open.

Then he returned and stood by the window, leaning gracefully on his rifle. His attitude, his

hunting suit, his great top-boots, made rather a picturesque object of him.

"Well?" repeated Etta, almost insolently.

"It would have been wiser to have married me," said De Chauxville, darkly.

Etta shrugged her shoulders.

"Because I understand you better; I *know* you better than your husband."

Etta turned and glanced at the clock.

"Have you come back from the bear-hunt to tell me this, or to avoid the bears?" she asked.

De Chauxville frowned. A man who has tasted fear does not like a question of his courage.

"I have come to tell you that and other things," he answered.

He looked at her with his sinister smile and a little upward jerk of the head. He extended his open hand, palm upwards, with the fingers slightly crooked.

"I hold you, Madame," he said—"I hold you in my hand. You are my slave, despite your brave title; my thing, my plaything, despite your servants, and your great houses, and your husband! When I have finished telling you all that I have to tell, you will understand. You will perhaps thank me for being merciful."

Etta laughed defiantly.

"You are afraid of Paul," she cried. "You are afraid of Karl Steinmetz; you will presently be afraid of me."

"I think not," said De Chauxville coolly. The two names just mentioned were certainly not of pleasant import in his ears, but he was not going to let a woman know that. This man had played dangerous cards before now. He was not at all sure of his ground. He did not know what Etta's position was in regard to Steinmetz. Behind the defiant woman there lurked the broad shadow of the man who never defied; who knew many things, but was ignorant of fear.

Unlike Karl Steinmetz, De Chauxville was not a bold player. He liked to be sure of his trick before he threw down his trump card. His method was not above suspicion. He liked to know what cards his adversary held, and one may be sure that he was not above peeping.

"Karl Steinmetz is no friend of yours," he said.

Etta did not answer. She was thinking of the conversation she had with Steinmetz in Petersburg. She was wondering whether the friendship he had offered—the solid thing, as he called it—was better than the love of this man.

"I have information now," went on De Chauxville, "which would have made you my wife had I had it sooner."

"I think not," said the lady insolently. She had dealt with such men before. Hers was the beauty that appealed to De Chauxville and such as he. It is not the beautiful women who see the best side of human nature.

"Even now," went on the Frenchman, "now that I know you—I still love you. You are the only woman I shall ever love."

"Indeed," murmured the lady, quite unmoved.

"Yes; although in a way I despise you—now that I know you."

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed Etta. "If you have anything to say, please say it. I have no time to probe your mysteries—to discover your parables. You know me well enough, perhaps, to be aware that I am not to be frightened by your cheap charlatanism."

"I know you well enough," retorted De Chauxville hoarsely, "to be aware that it was you who sold the Charity League papers to Vassili in Paris. I know you well enough, Madame, to be aware of your present position in regard to your husband. If I say a word in the right quarter you would never leave

Russia alive. I have merely to say to Catrina Lanovitch that it was you who banished her father for your own gain. I have merely to hand your name in to certain of the Charity League party, and even your husband could not save you."

He had gradually approached her, and uttered the last words face to face, his eyes close to hers. She held her head up—erect, defiant still.

"So you see, Madame," he said, "you belong to me."

She smiled.

"Hand and foot," he added. "But I am soft-hearted."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"What will you?" he said, looking out of the window. "I love you."

"Nonsense!"

He turned slowly round.

"What?"

"Nonsense," repeated Etta. "You love power; you are a bully. You love to please your own vanity by thinking that you have me in your power. I am not afraid of you."

De Chauxville leant gracefully against the window. He still held his rifle.

"Reflect a little," he said, with his cold smile.

"It would appear that you do not quite realise the situation. Women rarely realise situations in time. Our friend—your husband—has many of the English idiosyncrasies. He has all the narrow-minded notions of honour which obtain in that country. Added to this, I suspect him of possessing a truly Slavonic fire which he keeps under. 'A smoulderfire——' you know, Madame, our French proverbs. He is not the man to take a rational and broad-minded view of your little transaction with Monsieur Vassili; more especially, perhaps, as it banished his friend Stepán Lanovitch—the owner of this house, by the way. His reception of the news I have to tell him would be unpleasant—for you."

"What do you want?" interrupted Etta. "Money?"

"I am not a needy adventurer."

"And I am not such a fool, Monsieur de Chauxville, as to allow myself to be dragged into a vulgar intrigue, borrowed from a French novel, to satisfy your vanity."

De Chauxville's dull eyes suddenly flashed.

"I will trouble you to believe, Madame," he said, in a low, concentrated voice, "that such a thought never entered my head. A De Chauxville is not a commercial traveller, if you please. No; it may surprise you, but my feeling for you has more good in

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München

it than you would seem capable of inspiring. God only knows how it is that a bad woman can inspire a good love."

Etta looked at him in amazement. She did not always understand De Chauxville. No matter for surprise, perhaps; for he did not always understand himself.

"Then what do you want?" she asked.

"In the meantime, implicit obedience."

"What are you going to use me for?"

"I have ends," replied Claude de Chauxville, who had regained his usual half-mocking composure, "that you will serve. But they will be your ends as well as mine. You will profit by them. I will take very good care that you come to no harm, for you are the ultimate object of all this. At the end of it all I see only—you."

Etta shrugged her shoulders. It is to be presumed that she was absolutely heartless. Many people are. It is when a heartless woman has brains that one hears of her.

"What if I refuse?" asked Etta, keenly aware of the fact that this man was handicapped by his love for her.

"Then I will force you to obedience."

Etta raised her delicate eyebrows insolently.

"Ah!"

"Yes," said De Chauxville, with suppressed anger; "I will force you to obey me."

The Princess looked at him with her little mocking smile. She raised one hand to her head with a reflective air, as if a hair-pin were of greater importance than his words. She had dressed herself rather carefully for this interview. She never for a moment overlooked the fact that she was a woman, and beautiful. She did not allow him to forget it either.

Her mood of outraged virtue was now suddenly thrown in the background by a phase of open coquetry. Beneath her eyelids she watched for the effect of her pretty, provoking attitude on the man who loved her. She was on her own territory at this work, playing her own game; and she was more alarmed by De Chauxville's imperturbability than by anything he had said.

"You have a strange way of proving the truth of your own statements."

"What statement?"

She gave a little laugh. Her attitude, her glance, the cunning display of a perfect figure, the laugh, the whole woman was the incarnation of practised coquetry. She did not admit, even to herself, that

she was afraid of De Chauxville. But she was playing her best cards in her best manner. She had never known them fail.

Claude de Chauxville was a little white about the lips. His eyelids flickered; but by an effort he controlled himself, and she did not see the light in his eyes for which she looked.

"If you mean," he said coldly, "the statement that I made to you before you were married—namely, that I love you—I am quite content to leave the proof till the future. I know what I am about, Madame."

He took his watch from his pocket and consulted it.

"I must go in five minutes," he said. "I have a few instructions to give you, to which I must beg your careful attention."

He looked up, meeting Etta's somewhat sullen gaze with a smile of triumph.

"It is essential," he went on, "that I be invited to Osterno. I do not want to stay there long; indeed, I do not care to. But I must see the place. I dare say you can compass the invitation, Madame?"

"It will be difficult."

"And therefore worthy of your endeavour. I

have the greatest regard for your diplomatic skill. I leave the matter in your hands, Princess."

Etta shrugged her shoulders and looked past him out of the window. De Chauxville was considering her face carefully.

"Another point to be remembered," he went on, "is your husband's daily life at Osterno. The Prince is not above suspicion; the authorities are watching him. He is suspected of propagating revolutionary ideas among the peasantry. I should like you to find out as much as you can. Perhaps you know already. Perhaps he has told you, Princess. I know that beautiful face! He has told you! Good. Does he take an interest in the peasants?"

Etta did not answer.

"Kindly give me your attention, Madame. Does the Prince take an interest in the peasants?"

"Yes."

"An active interest?"

"Yes."

"Have you any details?"

"No," answered Etta.

"Then you will watch him, and procure those details."

Etta's face was defiant and pale. De Chauxville never took his eyes from it.

"I have undertaken a few small commissions for an old friend of yours, Monsieur Vassili, whom you obliged once before!" he said; and the defiance faded from her eyes.

"The authorities cannot, in these disturbed times, afford to tolerate princes of an independent turn of mind. Such men are apt to make the peasant think himself more important than he is. I dare say, Madame, that you are already tired of Russia. It might perhaps serve your ends if this country was made a little too hot for your husband, eh? I see your proud lips quivering, Princess! It is well to keep the lips under control. We, who deal in diplomacy, know where to look for such signs. Yes; I dare say I can get you out of Russia—for ever. But you must be obedient. You must reconcile yourself to the knowledge that you have met—your master."

He bowed in his graceful way, spreading out his hands in mock humility. Etta did not answer him. For the moment she could see no outlet to this maze of trouble, and yet she was conscious of not fearing De Chauxville so much as she feared Karl Steinmetz.

"A lenient master," pursued the Frenchman, whose vanity was tickled by the word. "I do not

ask much. One thing I desire is to be invited to Osterno, that I may be near you. The other is a humble request for details of your daily life, that I may think of you when absent."

Etta drew in her lips, moistening them as if they had suddenly become parched.

De Chauxville glanced at her and moved towards the door. He paused with his fingers on the handle, and looking back over his shoulder he said:

"Have I made myself quite clear?"

Etta was still looking out of the window with hard, angry eyes. She took no notice of the question.

De Chauxville turned the handle.

"Again let me impress upon you the advisability of implicit obedience," he said, with delicate insolence. "I mentioned the Charity League; but that is not my strongest claim upon your attention. I have another interesting little detail of your life, which I will reserve until another time."

He closed the door behind him, leaving Etta whitelipped.

CHAPTER IX.

A DANGEROUS EXPERIMENT.

A RUSSIAN forest in winter is one of nature's places of worship. There are some such places in the world, where Nature seems to stand in the presence of the Deity: a sunrise at sea; night on a snow mountain; midday in a Russian forest in winter. These places and these times are good for convalescent atheists and such as pose as unbelievers—the cheapest form of notoriety.

Paul had requested Catrina and Maggie to drive as quietly as possible through the forest. The warning was unnecessary, for the stillness of snow is infectious, while the beauty of the scene seemed to command silence. As usual, Catrina drove without bells. The one attendant on his perch behind was a fur-clad statue of servitude and silence. Maggie, leaning back, hidden to the eyes in her sables, had nothing to say to her companion. The way lay through forests of pine—trackless, motionless, virgin. The sun filtering through the snow-laden branches

cast a subdued golden light upon the ruddy upright trunks of the trees. At times a willow-grouse, white as the snow, light and graceful on the wing, rose from the branch where he had been laughing to his mate with a low cooing laugh, and fluttered away over the trees.

"A *kooropatká*," said Catrina, knowing the life of the forest almost as well as Paul, whose very existence was wrapped up in these things.

Far over the summits of the pines a snipe seemed to be wheeling a sentinel round. He followed them as they sped along, calling out all the while his deep warning note, like that of a lamb crouching beneath a hedge where the wind is not tempered.

Once or twice they heard the dismal howl of a wolf—the most melancholy, the weirdest, the most hopeless of Nature's calls. The whole forest seemed to be on the alert—astir and in suspense. The wolf, disturbed in his lair, no doubt heard and understood the cry of the watchful snipe and the sudden silence of the willow-grouse, who loves to sit and laugh when all is safe. A clumsy capercailzie, swinging along over the trees with a great flap and rush of wings, seemed to be intent on his own solitary, majestic business—a very king among the fowls of the air.

Amidst the topmost branches of the pines the wind whispered and stirred like a child in sleep; but beneath all was still. Every branch stood motionless under its burden of snow. The air was thin, exhilarating, brilliant—like dry champagne. It seemed to send the blood coursing through the veins with a very joy of life.

Catrina noted all these things while cleverly handling her ponies. They spoke to her with a thousand voices. She had roamed in these same forests with Paul, who loved them and understood them as she did.

Maggie, in the midst as it were of a revelation, leant back and wondered at it all. She, too, was thinking of Paul. She understood him better now. This drive had revealed to her a part of his nature which had rather puzzled her—a large, simple, quiet strength which had developed and grown to maturity beneath these trees. We are all part of what we have seen. We all carry with us through life somewhat of the scenes through which we passed in childhood.

Maggie knew now where Paul had learnt the quiet concentration of mind, the absorption in his own affairs, the complete lack of interest in the business of his neighbour which made him different from

other men. He had learnt these things at first hand from God's creatures. These forest dwellers of fur and feather went about their affairs in the same absorbed way, with the same complete faith, the same desire to leave and be left alone. The simplicity of Nature was his. His only craft was forest craft.

"Now you know," said Catrina, when they reached the hut, "why I hate Petersburg."

Maggie nodded. The effect of the forest was still upon her. She did not want to talk.

The woman who received them, the wife of a keeper, had prepared in a rough way for their reception. She had a large fire and bowls of warm milk. The doors and windows had been thrown wide open by Paul's orders. He wanted to spare Maggie too intimate an acquaintance with a Russian interior. The hut was really a shooting-box built by Paul some years earlier, and inhabited by a head-keeper, one learned in the ways of bear and wolf and lynx. The large dwelling-room had been carefully scrubbed. There was a smell of pine wood and soap. The table, ready spread with a simple luncheon, took up nearly the whole of the room.

While the two girls were warming themselves, a keeper came to the door of the hut and asked to see Catrina. He stood in the little doorway, completely

filling it, and explained that he could not come in as the buckles and straps of his snow-shoes were clogged and frozen. He wore the long Norwegian snow-shoes, and was held to be the quickest runner in the country.

Catrina had a long conversation with the man, who stood hatless, ruddy, and shy.

"It is," she then explained to Maggie, "Paul's own man, who always loads for him and carries his spare gun. He has sent him to tell us that the game has been ringed, and that the beaters will close in on a place called the Schapka Clearing, where there is a woodman's refuge. If we care to put on our snow-shoes, this man will guide us to the clearing and take care of us till the battue is over."

Of course Maggie welcomed the proposal with delight, and after a hasty luncheon the three glided off through the forest as noiselessly as they had come. After a tiring walk of an hour and more they came to the clearing and were duly concealed in the hut.

No one, the keeper told the ladies, except Paul, knew of their presence in the little wooden house. The arrangements of the beat had been slightly altered at the last moment after the hunters had separated. The keeper lighted a small fire and shyly attended to the ladies, removing their snow-

shoes with clumsy fingers. He closed the door, and arranged a branch of larch across the window so that they could stand near it without being seen.

They had not been there long before De Chauxville appeared. He moved quickly across the clearing, skimming over the snow with long sweeping strides. Two keepers followed him, and after having shown him the rough hiding-place prepared for him, silently withdrew to their places. Soon Karl Steinmetz came from another direction, and took up his position rather nearer to the hut, in a thicket of pine and dwarf oak. He was only twenty yards away from the refuge where the girls were concealed.

It was not long before Paul came. He was quite alone, and suddenly appeared at the far end of the clearing, in very truth a mighty hunter, standing nearly seven feet on his snow-shoes. One rifle he carried in his hand, another slung across his back. It was like a silent scene on a stage. The snow-white clearing, with long-drawn tracks across it where the snow-shoes had passed, the still trees, the brilliant sun, and the blue depths of the forest behind; while Paul—like the hero of some grim Arctic saga—a huge fur-clad Northern giant, stood alone in the desolation.

From his attitude it was apparent that he was

listening. It was probable that the cries of the birds and the distant howl of a wolf told his practised ears how near the beaters were. He presently moved across to where De Chauxville was hidden, spoke some words of advice or warning to him, and pointed with his gloved hand in the direction whence the game might be expected to come.

As a matter of fact Paul was asking De Chauxville the whereabouts of Steinmetz, who had gained his place of concealment unobserved by either. De Chauxville could give him no information, and Paul went away to his post dissatisfied. Karl Steinmetz must have seen them; he must have divined the subject of their conversation; but he remained hidden and gave no sign.

Paul's post was behind a fallen tree, and the watchers in the hut could see him, while he was completely hidden from any animal that might enter the open clearing from the far end. He turned and looked hard at the hut; but the larch branch across the window effectually prevented him from discovering whether anyone was behind it or not.

Thus they all waited in suspense. A blackcock skimmed across the open space and disappeared unmolested. A wolf—grey, gaunt, sneaking and lurching in his gait—trotted into the clearing and stood

listening with evil lips drawn back. The two girls watched him breathlessly. When he trotted on unmolested they drew a deep breath as if they had been under water. Paul, with his two rifles laid before him, watched the wolf depart with a smile. The girls could see the smile, and from it learnt somewhat of the man. The keeper beside them gave a little laugh and looked to the hammers of his rifle.

And still there was no sound. It was still, unreal, and like a scene on the stage. The birds skimming over the tops of the trees from time to time threw in, as it were, a note of fear and suspense. There was breathlessness in the air. A couple of hares, like white shadows in their spotless winter coats, shot from covert to covert across the open ground.

Then suddenly the keeper gave a little grunt and held up his hand, listening with parted lips and eager eyes. There was a distinct sound of breaking branches and crackling underwood.

They could see Paul cautiously rise from his knees to a crouching attitude. They followed the direction of his gaze, and before them the monarch of these forests stood in clumsy might. A bear had shambled to the edge of the clearing and was standing upright, growling and grumbling to himself, his

great paws waving from side to side, his shaggy head thrust forward with a recurring jerk singularly suggestive of a dandy with an uncomfortable collar. These bears of Northern Russia have not the reputation of being very fierce unless they are aroused from their winter quarters, when their wrath knows no bounds and their courage recognises no danger. Moreover, these kings of the Northern forests are huge beasts, capable of smothering a strong man by falling on him and lying there—a death which has come to more than one daring hunter. The beast's favourite method of dealing with his foe is to claw him to death, or else hug him till his ribs are snapped and crushed into his vitals.

The bear stood poking his head and looking about with little, fiery, bloodshot eyes for something to destroy. His rage was manifest, and in his strength he was a grand sight. The majesty of power and a dauntless courage were his.

It was De Chauxville's shot, and, while keeping his eye on the bear, Paul glanced impatiently over his shoulder from time to time, wondering why the Frenchman did not fire. The bear was a huge one, and would probably carry three bullets and still be a dangerous adversary.

The keeper muttered in his beard.

They were watching Paul breathlessly. The bear was approaching him. It would not be safe to defer firing another second.

Suddenly the keeper gave a short exclamation of astonishment and threw up his rifle.

There was another bear behind Paul, shambling towards him, unseen by him. All his attention was riveted on the huge brute forty yards in front of him. It was Claude de Chauxville's task to protect Paul from any flank or rear attack; and Claude de Chauxville was peering over his covert watching with blanched face the second bear, and lifting no hand, making no sign. The bear was within a few yards of Paul, who was crouching behind the fallen pine and now raising his rifle to his shoulder.

In a flash of comprehension the two girls saw all, through the panes of the closed window. It was still singularly like a scene on the stage. The second bear raised his powerful fore-paws as he approached. One blow would tear open Paul's brain.

A terrific report sent the girls staggering back, for a moment paralysing thought. The keeper had fired through the window, both barrels almost simultaneously. It was a question how much lead would bring the bear down before he covered the intervening dozen yards. In the confined space of the hut,

the report of the heavy double charge was like that of a cannon; moreover, Steinmetz, twenty yards away, had fired at the same moment.

The room was filled with smoke. The two girls were blinded for an instant. Then they saw the keeper tear open the door and disappear. The cold air through the shattered casement was a sudden relief to their lungs, choked with sulphur and the fumes of spent powder.

In a flash they were out of the open door; and there again, with the suddenness of a panorama, they saw another picture—Paul kneeling in the middle of the clearing taking careful aim at the retreating form of the first bear. They saw the puff of blue smoke rise from his rifle, they heard the sharp report; and the bear rolled over on its face.

Steinmetz and the keeper were walking towards Paul. Claude de Chauxville, standing outside his screen of brush-wood, was staring with wide, fear-stricken eyes at the hut which he had thought empty. He did not know that there were three people behind him, watching him. What had they seen? What had they understood?

Catrina and Maggie ran towards Paul. They were on snow-shoes, and made short work of the intervening distance.

Paul had risen to his feet. His face was grave. There was a singular gleam in his eyes, which was not a gleam of mere excitement such as the chase brings into some men's eyes.

Steinmetz looked at him and said nothing. For a moment Paul stood still. He looked round him, noting with experienced glance the lay of the whole incident—the dead form of the bear ten yards behind his late hiding-place, one hundred and eighty yards from the hut, a hundred and sixty yards from the spot whence Karl Steinmetz had sent his unerring bullet through the bear's brain. Paul saw it all. He measured the distances. He looked at De Chauxville, standing white-faced at his post, not fifty yards from the carcase of the second bear.

Paul seemed to see no one but De Chauxville. He went straight towards him, and the whole party followed in breathless suspense. Steinmetz was nearest to him, watching with his keen, quiet eyes.

Paul went up to De Chauxville and took the rifle from his hands. He opened the breech and looked into the barrels. They were clean; the rifle had not been fired off.

He gave a little laugh of contempt, and, throwing the rifle at De Chauxville's feet, turned abruptly away.

It was Catrina who spoke.

"If you had killed him," she said, "I would have killed you!"

Steinmetz picked up the rifle, closed the breech, and handed it to De Chauxville with a queer smile.

CHAPTER X.

A CLOUD.

When the Osterno party reached home that same evening the Starosta was waiting to see Steinmetz. His news was such that Steinmetz sent for Paul, and the three men went together to the little room beyond the smoking-room in the old part of the castle.

"Well?" said Paul, with the unconscious *hauteur* which made him a prince to these people.

The Starosta spread out his hands.

"Excellency," he answered, "I am afraid."

"Of what?"

The Starosta shrugged his narrow shoulders in cringing deprecation.

"Excellency, I do not know. There is something in the village—something in the whole country. I know not what it is. It is a feeling—one cannot see it, one cannot define it; but it is there, like the

gleam of water at the bottom of a deep well. The moujiks are getting dangerous. They will not speak to me. I am suspected. I am watched."

His shifty eyes, like black beads, flitted from side to side as he spoke. He was like a weasel at bay. It was the face of a man who went in bodily fear.

"I will go with you down to the village now," said Paul. "Is there any excuse—any illness?"

"Ah, Excellency," replied the chief, "there is always that excuse."

Paul looked at the clock.

"I will go now," he said. He began his simple preparations at once.

"There is dinner to be thought of," suggested Steinmetz with a resigned smile. "It is half-past seven."

"Dinner can wait," replied Paul in English. "You might tell the ladies that I have gone out, and will dine alone when I come back."

Steinmetz shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I think you are a fool," he said, "to go alone. If they discover your identity they will tear you to pieces."

"I am not afraid of them," replied Paul, with his head in the medicine cupboard, "any more than I

am afraid of a horse. They are like horses; they do not know their own strength."

"With this difference," added Steinmetz, "that the moujik will one day make the discovery. He is beginning to make it now. The Starosta is quite right, Paul. There is something in the air. It is about time that you took the ladies away from here and left me to manage it alone."

"That time will never come," answered Paul. "I am not going to leave you alone again."

He was pushing his arms into the sleeves of the old brown coat reaching to his heels, a garment which commanded as much love and respect in Osterno as ever would an angel's wing.

Steinmetz opened the drawer of his bureau and laid a revolver on the table.

"At all events," he said, "you may as well have the wherewithal to make a fight of it, if the worst comes to the worst."

"As you like," answered Paul, slipping the fire-arm into his pocket.

The Starosta moved away a pace or two. He was essentially a man of peace.

Half an hour later it became known in the village that the Moscow Doctor was in the house of one Ivan Krass, where he was prepared to see all patients

who were not suffering from infectious complaints. The door of this cottage was soon besieged by the sick and the idle, while the Starosta stood in the doorway and kept order.

Within, in the one dwelling-room of the cottage, were assembled as picturesque and as unsavoury a group as the most enthusiastic modern "slummer" could desire to see.

Paul, standing by the table with two paraffin lamps placed behind him, saw each suppliant in turn, and all the while he kept up a running conversation with the more intelligent, some of whom lingered on to talk and watch.

"Ah, John the son of John," he would say, "what is the matter with you? It is not often I see you. I thought you were clean and thrifty."

To which John the son of John replied that the winter had been hard and fuel scarce, that his wife was dead and his children stricken with influenza.

"But you have had relief; our good friend the Starosta——"

"Does what he can," grumbled John, "but he dare not do much. The bárins will not let him. The nobles want all the money for themselves. The Emperor is living in his palace, where there are fountains of wine. We pay for that with our taxes.

You see my hand—I cannot work; but I must pay the taxes, or else we shall be turned out into the street."

Paul, while attending to the wounded hand—the old story of a slight wound neglected, and a constitution with all the natural healing power drained out of it by hunger and want and vodka—Paul, ever watchful, glanced round and saw sullen, lowering faces, eager eyes, hungry, cruel lips.

"But the winter is over now. You are mistaken about the nobles. They do what they can. The Emperor pays for the relief that you have had all these months. It is foolish to talk as you do."

"I only tell the truth," replied the man, wincing as Paul deliberately cut away the dead flesh. "We know now why it is that we are all so poor."

"Why?" asked Paul, pouring some lotion over a wad of lint and speaking indifferently.

"Because the nobles——" began the man, and some one nudged him from behind, urging him to silence.

"You need not be afraid of me," said Paul. "I tell no tales, and I take no money."

"Then why do you come?" asked a voice in the background. "Someone pays you; who is it?"

"Ah, Tula," said Paul, without looking up. "You

are there, are you? The great Tula. There is a hardworking, sober man, my little fathers, who never beats his wife, and never drinks, and never borrows money. A useful neighbour! What is the matter with you, Tula? You have been too sparing with the vodka, no doubt. I must order you a glass every hour."

There was a little laugh. But Paul, who knew these people, was quite alive to the difference of feeling towards himself. They still accepted his care, his help, his medicine; but they were beginning to doubt him.

"There is your own Prince," he went on fearlessly to the man whose hand he was binding up. "He will help you when there is real distress."

An ominous silence greeted this observation.

Paul raised his head and looked round. In the dim light of the two smoky lamps he saw a ring of wild faces. Men with shaggy beards and hair all entangled and unkempt, with fierce eyes and lowering glances; women with faces that unsexed them. There lived despair and desperation and utter recklessness in the air, in the attitude, in the hearts of these people. And Paul had worked among them for years. The sight would have been heart-breaking had he been the sort of man to admit the pos-

sibility of a broken heart. All that he had done had been frustrated by the wall of heartless bureaucracy against which he had pitched his single strength. There was no visible progress. These were not the faces of men and women moving up the social scale by the aid of education and the deeper self-respect that follows it. Some of them were young, although they hardly looked it. They were old in life and misery. Some of them he knew to be educated. He had paid for the education himself. He had risked his own personal freedom to procure it for them, and misery had killed the seed.

He looked on this stony ground, and his stout heart was torn with pity. It is easy to be patient in social economy when that vague jumble of impossible ideas is calmly discussed across the dinner-table. But the result seems hopelessly distant when the mass of the poor and wretched stands before one in the flesh.

Paul knew that this little room was only a specimen of the whole of Russia. Each of these poor peasants represented a million — equally hopeless, equally powerless to contend with an impossible taxation.

He could not give them money, because the tax-collector had them all under his thumb and would

exact the last kopeck. The question was far above his single-handed reach, and he did not dare to meet it openly and seek the assistance of the few fellow nobles who faced the position without fear.

He could not see in the brutal faces before him one spark of intelligence, one little gleam of independence and self-respect which could be attributed to his endeavour, which the most sanguine construction could take as resulting from his time and money given to a hopeless cause.

"Well," he said. "Have you nothing to tell me of your Prince?"

"You know him," answered the man who had spoken from the safe background. "We need not tell you."

"Yes," answered Paul; "I know him."

He would not defend himself.

"There," he went on, addressing the man whose hand was now bandaged. "You will do. Keep clean and sober, and it will heal. Get drunk and go dirty, and you will die. Do you understand, Ivan Ivanovitch?"

The man grunted sullenly, and moved away to give place to a woman with a baby in her arms.

Paul glanced into her face. He had known her

a few years earlier a happy child playing at her mother's cottage door.

She drew back the shawl that covered her child with a faint, far-off gleam of pride in her eyes. There was something horribly pathetic in the whole picture. The child-mother, her rough, unlovely face lighted for a moment with that gleam from Paradise which men never know; the huge man bending over her, and between them the wizened, disease-stricken little waif of humanity.

"When he was born he was a very fine child," said the mother.

Paul glanced at her. She was quite serious. She was looking at him with a strange pride on her face. Paul nodded and drew aside the shawl. The baby was staring at him with wise, grave eyes, as if it could have told him a thing or two if it had only been gifted with the necessary speech. Paul knew that look. It meant starvation.

"What is it?" asked the child-mother. "It is only some little illness, is it not?"

"Yes; it is only a little illness."

He did not add that no great illness is required to kill a small child. He was already writing something in his pocket-book. He tore the leaf out and gave it to her.

"This," he said, "is for you—yourself, you understand? Take that each day to the Starosta and he will give you what I have written down. If you do not eat all that he gives you and drink what there is in the bottle as he directs you, the baby will die —you understand? You must give nothing away; nothing even to your husband."

The next patient was the man whose voice had been heard from the safe retreat of the background. His dominant malady was obvious. A shaky hand, an unsteady eye, and a bloated countenance spoke for themselves. But he had other diseases more or less developed.

"So you have no good to tell of your Prince," said Paul, looking into the man's face.

"Our Prince, Excellency! He is not our Prince. His forefathers seized this land; that is all."

"Ah! Who has been telling you that?"

"No one," grumbled the man. "We know it; that is all."

"But you were his father's serfs, before the free-dom. Let me see your tongue. Yes; you have been drinking—all the winter. Ah! is not that so, little father; your parents were serfs before the free-dom."

"Freedom!" growled the man. "A pretty freedom! We were better off before."

"Yes; but the world interfered with serfdom, because it got its necessary touch of sentiment. There is no sentiment in starvation."

The man did not understand. He grunted acquiescence nevertheless. The true son of the people is always ready to grunt acquiescence to all that sounds like abuse.

"And what is this Prince like? Have you seen him?" went on Paul.

"No; I have not seen him. If I saw him I would kick his head to pieces."

"Ah, just open your mouth a little wider. Yes you have a nasty throat there. You have had diphtheria. So you would kick his head to pieces. Why?"

"He is a tchinovnik—a Government spy. He lives on the taxes. But it will not be for long. There is a time coming——"

"Ah! What sort of a time? Now you must take this to the Starosta. He will give you a bottle. It is not to drink. It is to wash your throat with. Remember that, and do not give it to your wife by way of a tonic as you did last time. So there are changes coming, are there?"

"There is a change coming for the Prince—for all the princes," replied the man in the usual tap-room jargon. "For the Emperor too. The poor man has had enough of it. God made the world for the poor man as well as for the rich. Riches should be equally divided. They are going to be. The country is going to be governed by a Mir. There will be no taxes. The Mir makes no taxes. It is the tchinovniks who make the taxes and live on them."

"Ah, you are very eloquent, little father. If you talk like this in the kabák no wonder you have a bad throat. There, I can do no more for you. You must wash more and drink less. You might try a little work perhaps; it stimulates the appetite. And with a throat like that I should not talk so much if I were you. Next."

The next comer was afflicted with a wound that would not heal—a common trouble in cold countries. While attending to this sickening sore Paul continued his conversation with the last patient.

"You must tell me," he said, "when these changes are about to come. I should like to be there to see. It will be interesting."

The man laughed mysteriously.

"So the government is to be by a Mir, is it?" went on Paul.

"Yes; the poor man is to have a say in it."

"That will be interesting. But at the Mir everyone talks at once and no one listens; is it not so?"

The man made no reply.

"Is the change coming soon?" asked Paul coolly.

But there was no reply. Someone had seized the loquacious orator of the kabák, and he was at that moment being quietly hustled out of the room.

After this there was a sullen silence, which Paul could not charm away, charm he never so wisely.

When his patients had at last ebbed away he lighted a cigarette and walked thoughtfully back to the castle. There was danger in the air, and he was one of those men upon whom danger acts as a pleasant stimulant.

CHAPTER XI.

THE NET IS DRAWN.

DURING the days following Paul's visit to the village the ladies did not see much male society. Paul and Steinmetz usually left the castle immediately after breakfast and did not return till nightfall.

"Is there anything wrong?" Maggie asked Steinmetz on the evening of the second day.

Steinmetz had just come into the vast drawing-room dressed for dinner—stout, placid, and very clean-looking. They were alone in the room.

"Nothing, my dear young lady—yet," he answered, coming forward and rubbing his broad palms slowly together.

Maggie was reading an English newspaper. She turned its pages without pausing to notice the black and sticky obliterations effected by the postal authorities before delivery. It was no new thing to her now to come upon the Press Censor's handiwork in the columns of such periodicals and newspapers as Paul received from England.

"Because," she said, "if there is you need not be afraid of telling me."

"To have that fear would be to offer you an insult," replied Steinmetz. "Paul and I are investigating matters, that is all. The plain truth, my dear young lady, is that we do not know ourselves what is in the wind. We only know there is something. You are a horsewoman—you know the feeling of a restive horse. One suspects that he is only waiting for an excuse to shy or to kick or to rear. One feels it thrilling in him. Paul and I have that

feeling in regard to the peasants. We are going the round of the outlying villages, steadily and carefully. We are seeking for the fly on the horse's body—you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

She gave a little nod. She had not lost colour, but there was an anxious look in her eyes.

"Some people would have sent to Tver for the soldiers," Steinmetz went on. "But Paul is not that sort of man. He will not do it yet. You remember our conversation at the Charity Ball in London?"

"Yes."

"I did not want you to come then. I am sorry you have come now."

Maggie laid aside the newspaper with a little laugh.

"But, Herr Steinmetz," she said, "I am not afraid. Please remember that. I have absolute faith in you—and in Paul."

Steinmetz accepted this statement with his grave smile.

"There is only one thing I would recommend," he said, "and that is a perfect discretion. Speak of this to no one, especially to no servants. You remember your own mutiny in India. Gott! what

wonderful people you English are—men and women alike! You remember how the ladies kept up and brazened it out before the servants. You must do the same. I think I hear the rustle of the Princess's dress. Yes! And there is no news in the papers, you say?"

"None," replied Maggie.

It may not have been entirely by chance that Claude de Chauxville drove over to Osterno to pay his respects the next day, and expressed himself desolated at hearing that the Prince had gone out with Herr Steinmetz in a sleigh to a distant corner of the estate.

"My horses must rest," said the Frenchman, calmly taking off his fur gloves. "Perhaps the Princess will see me."

A few minutes later he was shown into the morning-room.

"Did I see Mademoiselle Delafield on snow-shoes in the forest as I came along?" De Chauxville asked the servant in perfect Russian before the man left the room.

"Doubtless, Excellency. She went out on her snow-shoes half an hour ago."

"That is all right," said the Frenchman to himself when the door was closed.

He went to the fire and warmed his slim white fingers. There was an evil smile lurking beneath his moustache.

When Etta opened the door a minute later he bowed low without speaking. There was a suggestion of triumph in his attitude.

"Well?" said the Princess, without acknowledging his salutation.

De Chauxville raised his eyebrows with the resigned surprise of a man to whom no feminine humour is new. He brought forward a chair.

"Will you sit?" he said, with exaggerated courtesy. "I have much to say to you. Besides, we have all the time. Your husband and his German friend are miles away. I passed Miss Delafield in the forest. She is not quite at home on her snow-shoes yet. She cannot be back for at least half an hour."

Etta bit her lip as she looked at the chair. She sat slowly down and drew in the folds of her rich dress.

"I have the good fortune to find you alone."

"So you have informed me," she replied coldly.

De Chauxville leant against the mantelpiece and looked down at her thoughtfully.

"At the bear-hunt the other day," he said, "I

had the misfortune to—well, to fall out with the Prince. We were not quite at one on a question of etiquette. He thought that I ought to have fired. I did not fire; I was not ready. It appears that the Prince considered himself to be in danger. He was nervous—flurried."

"You are not always artistic in your untruths," interrupted Etta. "I know nothing of the incident to which you refer, but in lying you should always endeavour to be consistent. I am sure Paul was not nervous—or flurried."

De Chauxville smiled imperturbably. His end was gained. Etta obviously knew nothing of his attempt to murder Paul at the bear-hunt.

"It was nothing," he went on; "we did not come to words. But we have never been much in sympathy; the coldness is intensified, this is all. So I took the opportunity of calling when I knew he was away."

"How did you know he was away?"

"Ah, Madame, I know more than I am credited with."

Etta gave a little laugh and shrugged her shoulders.

"You do not care for Osterno?" suggested De Chauxville.

"I hate it."

"Precisely. And I am here to help you to get away from Russia once for all. Ah! you may shake your head. Some day, perhaps, I shall succeed in convincing you that I have only your interests at heart. I am here, Princess, to make a little arrangement with you—a final arrangement, I hope."

He paused, looking at her with a sudden gleam in his eyes.

"Not the last of all," he added in a different tone. "That will make you my wife."

Etta allowed this statement to pass unchallenged. Her courage and energy were not exhausted. She was learning to nurse her forces.

"Your husband," went on De Chauxville, after he had sufficiently enjoyed the savour of his own words, "is a brave man. To frighten him it is necessary to resort to strong measures. The last and the strongest measure in the diplomat's scale is the People. The People, Madame, will take no denial. It is a game I have played before—a dangerous game, but I am not afraid."

"You need not trouble to be theatrical with me," put in Etta scornfully. She was sitting with a patch of colour in either cheek. At times this man had the power of moving her, and she was afraid of

allowing him to exercise it. She knew her own weakness—her inordinate vanity; for vanity is the weakness of strong women. She was ever open to flattery, and Claude de Chauxville flattered her in every word he spoke; for by act and speech he made it manifest that she was the motive power of his existence.

"A man who plays for a high stake," went on the Frenchman in a quieter voice, "must be content to throw his all on the table time after time. A week to-night—Thursday, the fifth of April—I will throw down my all on the turn of a card. For the People are like that. It is *rouge* or *noir*—one never knows. We only know that there is no third colour, no compromise."

Etta was listening now with ill-disguised interest. At last he had given her something definite—a date.

"On Thursday," he went on, "the peasants will make a demonstration. You know as well as I do —as well as Prince Pavlo does, despite his imperturbable face—that the whole country is a volcano which may break forth at any moment. But the control is strong, and therefore there is never a large eruption—a grumble here, a gleam of fire there, a sullen heat everywhere! But it is held in check

by the impossibility of communication. It seems strange, but Russia stands because she has no penny postage. The great crash will come, not by force of arms, but by ways of peace. The signal will be a postal system: the standard of the revolution will be a postage-stamp. All over this country there are millions waiting and burning to rise up and crush despotism, but they are held in check by the simple fact that they are far apart and they cannot write to each other. When, at last, they are brought together there will be no fight at all, because they will overwhelm their enemies. That time, Madame, has not come yet. We are only at the stage of tentative underground rumblings. But a little eruption is enough to wipe out one man if he be standing on the spot."

"Go on," said Etta quietly—too quietly, De Chauxville might have thought had he been calmer.

"I want you," he went on, "to assist me. We shall be ready on Thursday. I shall not appear in the matter at all. I have strong colleagues at my back. Starvation and misery, properly handled, are powerful incentives."

"And how do you propose to handle them?" asked Etta in the quiet voice.

"The peasants will make a demonstration. The

rest we must leave to—well, to the course of fortune. I have no doubt that our astute friend Karl Steinmetz will manage to hold them in check. But whatever the end of the demonstration, the outcome will be the impossibility of a longer residence in this country for the Prince Pavlo Alexis. A regiment of soldiers could hardly make it possible."

"I do not understand," said Etta. "What you describe as a demonstration—is it a rising?"

De Chauxville nodded, with a grin.

"In force, to take what they want by force?" asked the Princess.

De Chauxville spread out his hands in his graceful Gallic way.

"That depends."

"And what do you wish me to do?" asked Etta, with the same concentrated quiet.

"In the first place, to believe that no harm will come to you, either directly or indirectly. They would not dare to touch the Prince; they will content themselves with breaking a few windows."

"What do you want me to do?" repeated Etta.

De Chauxville paused.

"Merely," he answered lightly, "to leave open a door—a side door. I understand that there is a door in the old portion of the castle leading up by

a flight of stairs to the smoking-room, and thence to the new part of the building."

Etta did not answer. De Chauxville glanced at his watch and walked to the window, where he stood looking out. He was too refined a person to whistle, but his attitude was suggestive of that mode of killing time.

"This door I wish you to unbar yourself before dinner on Thursday evening," he said, turning round and slowly coming towards her.

"And I refuse to do it," said Etta.

"Ah!"

Etta sprang to her feet and faced him—a beautiful woman, a very queen of anger. Her blazing eyes were on a level with his.

"Yes," she cried, with clenched fists, standing her full height till she seemed to look down into his mean, fox-like face. "Yes; I refuse to betray my husband——"

"Stop! He is not your husband."

Slowly the anger faded out of her eyes; her clenched fists relaxed. Her fingers were scraping nervously at the silk of her dress, like the fingers of a child seeking support.

"What do you mean?" she whispered. "What do you mean?"

"Sydney Bamborough is your husband," said the Frenchman without taking his dull eyes from her face.

"He is dead," she hissed.

"Prove it!"

He walked past her and leant against the mantelpiece in the pose of easy familiarity which he had maintained during the first portion of their interview.

"Prove it, Madame," he said again.

"He died at Tver," she said; but there was no conviction in her voice. With her title and position to hold to she could face the world. Without these what was she?

"A local newspaper reports that the body of a man was discovered on the plains of Tver and duly buried in the pauper cemetery," said De Chauxville indifferently. "Your husband—Sydney Bamborough, I mean—was, for reasons which need not be gone into here, in the neighbourhood of Tver at the time. A police officer, who has since been transferred to Odessa, was of the opinion that the dead man was a foreigner. There are about twelve thousand foreigners in Tver—operatives in the manufactories. Your husband—Sydney Bamborough, *bien entendu*—left Tver to proceed eastward and cross Siberia to China in order to avoid the emissaries of the Charity League, who were looking out for him at the western

frontier. He will be due at one of the Treaty Ports in China in about a month. Upon the supposition that the body discovered on the plains of Tver was that of your husband, you took the opportunity of becoming a princess. It was enterprising. I admire your spirit. But it was dangerous. I, Madame, can suppress Sydney Bamborough when he turns up. I have two arrows in my quiver for him: one is the Charity League, the other the Russian Government, who want him. Your husband—I beg your pardon—the Prince would perhaps take a different view of the case. It is a pretty story. I will tell it to him unless I have your implicit obedience."

Etta stood dry-lipped before him. She tried to speak, but no words came from her lips.

De Chauxville looked at her with a quiet smile of triumph, and she knew that he loved her. There is no defining love, nor telling when it merges into hatred.

"Thursday evening, before dinner," said De Chauxville.

And he left her standing on the hearthrug, her lips moving and framing no words.

CHAPTER XII.

AN APPEAL.

"HAVE you spoken to the Princess?" asked Steinmetz, without taking the cigar from his lips.

They were driving home through the forest that surrounds Osterno as the sea surrounds an island. They were alone in the sleigh. That which they had been doing had required no servant. Paul was driving, and consequently the three horses were going as hard as they could. The snow flew past their faces like the foam over the gunwale of a boat that is thrashing into a ten-knot breeze. Yet it was not all snow. There were flecks of foam from the horses' mouths mingled with it.

"Yes," answered Paul. His face was set and hard, his eyes stern. This trouble with the peasants was affecting him more keenly than he suspected. It was changing the man's face—drawing lines about his lips, streaking his forehead with the marks of care. His position can hardly be realised by an Englishman unless it be compared to that of the

captain of a sinking ship full of human souls who have been placed under his care.

"And what did she say?" asked Steinmetz.

"That she would not leave unless we all went with her."

Steinmetz drew the furs closer up round him.

"Yes," he said, glancing at his companion's face, and seeing little but the eyes by reason of the sable collar of his coat, which met the fur of his cap; "yes, and why not?"

"I cannot leave them," answered Paul. "I cannot go away now that there is trouble among them. What it is, goodness only knows! They would never have got like this by themselves. Somebody has been at them, and I don't think it is the Nihilists. It is worse than that. Some devil has been stirring them up, and they know no better. He is still at it. They are getting worse day by day, and I cannot catch him. If I do, by God! Steinmetz, I'll twist his neck."

Steinmetz smiled grimly.

"Yes," he answered, "you are capable of it. For me, I am getting tired of the moujik. He is an inveterate, incurable fool. If he is going to be a dangerous fool as well, I should almost be inclined to let him go to the devil in his own way."

"I dare say; but you are not in my position."

"No; that is true, Pavlo. They were not my father's serfs. Generations of my ancestors have not saved generations of their ancestors from starvation. My fathers before me have not toiled and saved and legislated for them. I have not learnt medicine that I might doctor them. I have not risked my health and life in their sties, where pigs would refuse to live. I have not given my whole heart and soul to their welfare, to receive no thanks, but only hatred. No, it is different for me. I owe them nothing, *mein Lieber;* that is the difference."

"If I agree to make a bolt for Petersburg to-morrow, will you come?" retorted Paul.

"No," answered the stout man.

"I thought not. Your cynicism is only a matter of words, Steinmetz, and not of deeds. There is no question of either of us leaving Osterno. We must stay and fight it out here."

"That is so," answered Steinmetz, with the Teutonic stolidity of manner which sometimes came over him. "But the ladies—what of them?"

Paul did not answer. They were passing over the rise of a heavy drift. It was necessary to keep the horses up to their work to prevent the runners of the sleigh sinking into the snow. With voice and

whip Paul encouraged them. He was kind to animals, but never spared them—a strong man who gave freely of his strength and expected an equal generosity.

"This is no place for Miss Delafield," added Steinmetz, looking straight in front of him.

"I know that!" answered Paul sharply. "I wish to God she was not here!" he added in a lower tone, and the words were lost beneath the frozen moustache.

Steinmetz made no answer. They drove on through the gathering gloom. The sky was of a yellow grey, and the earth reflected the dismal hue of it. Presently it began to snow, driving in a fine haze from the north. The two men lapsed into silence. Steinmetz, buried in his furs like a cumbrous bear, appeared to be half asleep. They had had a long and wearisome day. The horses had covered their forty miles and more from village to village, where the two men had only gathered discouragement and foreboding. Some of the Starostas were sullen; others openly scared. None of them were glad to see Steinmetz. Paul had never dared to betray his identity. With the gendarmes—the tchinovniks—they had not deemed it wise to hold communication.

"Stop!" cried Steinmetz suddenly, and Paul pulled the horses on to their haunches.

"I thought you were asleep," he said.

There was no one in sight. They were driving along the new road now, the highway that Paul had constructed from Osterno to Tver. The road itself was, of course, indistinguishable, but the telegraph posts marked its course.

Steinmetz tumbled heavily out of his furs and went towards the nearest telegraph post.

"Where is the wire?" he shouted.

Paul followed him in the sleigh. Together they peered up into the darkness and the falling snow. The posts were there, but the wire was gone. A whole length of it had been removed. They were cut off from civilisation by one hundred and forty miles of untrodden snow.

Steinmetz clambered back into the sleigh and drew up the fur apron. He gave a strange little laugh that had a ring of boyish excitement in it. This man had not always been stout and placid. He too had had his day, and those who knew him said that it had been a stirring one.

"That settles one question," he said.

"Which question?" asked Paul.

He was driving as hard as the horses could lay

hoof to ground, taken with a sudden misgiving and a great desire to reach Osterno before dark.

"The question of the ladies," replied Steinmetz. "It is too late for them to go now."

The village, nestling beneath the grim protection of Osterno, was deserted and forlorn. All the doors were closed, the meagre curtains drawn. It was very cold. There was a sense of relief in this great frost; for when Nature puts forth her strength men are usually cowed thereby.

At the castle all seemed to be in order. The groom, in his great sheepskin coat, was waiting in the doorway. The servants threw open the vast doors, and stood respectfully in the warm, brilliantly-lighted hall while their master passed in.

"Where is the Princess?" Steinmetz asked his valet while he was removing the evidences of a long day in the open air.

"In her drawing-room, Excellency."

"Then go and ask her if she will give me a cup of tea in a few minutes."

A few minutes later Steinmetz, presenting himself at the door of the little drawing-room attached to Etta's suite of rooms, found the Princess in a matchless tea-gown waiting beside a table laden with silver tea-appliances—a dainty samovar, a tiny tea-

pot, a spirit-lamp and the rest, all in the wonderful silver-work of the Slavonski Bazaar in Moscow.

"You see," she said with a smile, for she always smiled on men, "I have obeyed your orders."

Steinmetz bowed gravely. He was one of the few men who could face that smile and be strong. He closed the door carefully behind him. No mention was made of the fact that his message had implied, and she had understood, that he wished to see her alone. Etta was rather pale. There was an anxious look in her eyes—behind the smile as it were. She was afraid of this man. She looked at the flame of the samovar, busying herself among the tea-things with pretty curving fingers and rustling sleeves. But the tea was never made.

"I begin to think," said Steinmetz, coming to the point in his bluff way, "that you are a sort of beautiful Jonah, a graceful stormy petrel, a fair wandering Jewess. There is always trouble where you go."

She glanced at his broad face, and read nothing there.

"Go on," she said. "What have I been doing now? How you hate me, Herr Steinmetz!"

"Perhaps it is safer than loving you," he answered.

"I suppose," she said, with a quaint little air of resignation which was very disarming, "that you have come here to scold me—you do not want any tea?"

"No; I do not want any tea."

She lowered the wick of the spirit-lamp, and the peaceful music of the samovar was still. In her clever eyes there was a little air of sidelong indecision. She could not make up her mind how to take him. Her chiefest method was so old as to be biblical. Yet she could not take him with her eyelids. She had tried.

"You are horribly grave," she said.

"The situation," he replied, "is horribly grave."

Etta looked up at him as he stood before her, and the lamplight, falling on the perfect oval of her face, showed it to be white and drawn.

"Princess," said the man, "there are in the lives of some of us times when we cease to be men and women, and become mere human beings. There are times, I mean, when the thousand influences of sex die at one blow of Fate. This is such a time. We must forget that you are a beautiful woman; I verily believe that there is none more beautiful in the world. I once knew one whom I admired more, but that was not because she was more beautiful. That,

however, is my own story, and this"—he paused and looked round the little room, furnished, decorated, for her comfort—"this is your story. We must forget that I am a man, and therefore subject to the influence of your beauty."

She sat looking up into his strong, grave face, and during all that followed he never moved.

"I know you," he said, "to be courageous, and must ask you to believe that I exaggerate nothing in what I am about to tell you. I tell it to you instead of leaving Paul to do so, because I know his complete fearlessness, and his blind faith in a people who are unworthy of it. He does not realise the gravity of the situation. They are his own people. A sailor never believes that his own ship is unseaworthy."

"Go on," said Etta, for he had paused.

"This country," he continued, "is unsettled. The people of the estate are on the brink of a revolt. You know what the Russian peasant is. It will be no Parisian *émeute,* half noise, half laughter. We cannot hope to hold this old place against them. We cannot get away from it. We cannot send for help because we have no one to send. Princess, this is no time for half-confidences. I know—for I know these people better even than Paul knows them

—I am convinced that this is not the outcome of their own brains. They are being urged on by someone. There is someone at their backs. This is no revolt of the peasants, organised by the peasants. Princess, you must tell me all you know!"

"I—I," she stammered, "I know nothing."

And then suddenly she burst into tears, and buried her face in a tiny useless handkerchief. It was so unlike her and so sudden that Steinmetz was startled.

He laid his great hand soothingly on her shoulder.

"I know," he said quietly, "I know more than you think. I am no saint, Princess, myself. I too have had my difficulties. I have had my temptations, and I have not always resisted. God knows it is difficult for men to do always the right thing. It is a thousand times more difficult for women. When we spoke together in Petersburg, and I offered you my poor friendship, I was not acting in the dark. I knew as much then as I do now. Princess, I knew about the Charity League papers. I knew more than any except Stepán Lanovitch, and it was he who told me."

He was stroking her shoulder with the soothing movements that one uses towards a child in distress. His great hand, broad and thick, had a certain sense

of quiet comfort and strength in it. Etta ceased sobbing, and sat with bowed head, looking through her tears into the gay wood-fire. It is probable that she failed to realise the great charity of the man who was speaking to her. For the capacity for evil merges at some point or other into incapability for comprehending good.

"Is that all he knows?" she was wondering,

The suggestion that Sydney Bamborough was not dead had risen up to eclipse all other fear in her mind. In some part her thought reached him.

"I know so much," he said, "that it is safest to tell me more. I offered you my friendship because I thought that no woman could carry through your difficulties unaided. Princess, the admiration of Claude de Chauxville may be pleasant, but I venture to think that my friendship is essential."

Etta raised her head a little. She was within an ace of handing over to Karl Steinmetz the rod of power held over her by the Frenchman. There was something in Steinmetz that appealed to her and softened her, something that reached a tender part of her heart through the coating of vanity, through the hardness of worldly experience.

"I have known De Chauxville twenty-five years," he went on, and Etta deferred her confession. "We

have never been good friends, I admit. I am no saint, Princess, but De Chauxville is a villain. Some day you may discover, when it is too late, that it would have been for Paul's happiness, for your happiness, for everyone's good, to have nothing more to do with Claude de Chauxville. I want to save you that discovery. Will you act upon my advice? Will you make a stand now? Will you come to me and tell me all that De Chauxville knows about you that he could ever use against you? Will you give yourself into my hands—give me your battle to fight? You cannot do it alone. Only believe in my friendship, Princess. That is all I ask."

Etta shook her head.

"I think not," she answered, in a voice too light, too superficial, too hopelessly shallow for the depth of the moment. She was thinking only of Sydney Bamborough, and of that dread secret. She fought with what arms she wielded best—the lightest, the quickest, the most baffling.

"As you will," said Steinmetz.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE EDGE OF THE STORM.

A RUSSIAN village kabák, with a smoking lamp, of which the chimney is broken. The greasy curtains drawn across the small windows exclude the faintest possibility of a draught. The moujik does not like a draught; in fact, he hates the fresh air of heaven. Air that has been breathed three or four times over is the air for him; it is warmer. The atmosphere of this particular inn is not unlike that of every other inn in the White Empire, inasmuch as it is heavily seasoned with the scent of cabbage soup. The odour of this nourishing compound is only exceeded in unpleasantness by the taste of the same. Added to this warm smell there is the smoke of a score of the very cheapest cigarettes. The Russian peasant smokes his cigarette now. It is the first step, and it does not cost him much. It is the dawn of Progress—the thin end of the wedge which will broaden out into Anarchy. The poor man who smokes a cigarette is sure to pass on to Socialistic opinions and troubles

in the market-place. Witness the cigarette-smoking countries. Moreover, this same poor man is not a pleasant companion. He smokes a poor cigarette.

There is also the smell of vodka, which bottled curse is standing in tumblers all down the long table. The news has spread in Osterno that vodka is to be had for the asking at the kabák, where there is a meeting. Needless to say, the meeting is a large one. Foolishness and thirst are often found in the same head—a cranium which, by the way, is exceptionally liable to be turned by knowledge or drink.

If the drink at the kabák of Osterno was dangerous, the knowledge was no less so.

"I tell you, little fathers," an orator was shouting, "that the day of the capitalist has gone. The rich men—the princes, the nobles, the great merchants, the monopolists, the tchinovniks—tremble. They know that the poor man is awaking at last from his long lethargy. What have we done in Germany? What have we done in America? What have we done in England and France?"

Whereupon he banged an unwashed fist upon the table with such emphasis that more than one of the audience clutched his glass of vodka in alarm, lest a drop of the precious liquor should be wasted.

No one seemed to know what had been done in Germany, in America, in England, or in France. The people's orator is a man of many questions and much fist-banging. The moujiks of Osterno gazed at him beneath their shaggy brows. Half of them did not understand him. They were as yet uneducated to a comprehension of the street orator's periods. A few of the more intelligent waited for him to answer his own questions, which he failed to do. A vague and ominous question carries as much weight with some people as a statement, and has the signal advantage of being less incriminating.

The speaker—a neckless, broad-shouldered ruffian of the type known in England as "unemployed"—looked round with triumphant head well thrown back. From his attitude it was obvious that he had been the salvation of the countries named, and had now come to Russia to do the same for her. He spoke with the throaty accent of the Pole. It was quite evident that his speech was a written one—probably a printed harangue issued to him and his compeers for circulation throughout the country. He delivered many of the longer words with a certain unctuous roll of the tongue, and an emphasis indicating the fact that he did not know their meaning.

"From afar," he went on, "we have long been

watching you. We have noted your difficulties and your hardships, your sickness, your starvation. 'These men of Tver,' we have said, 'are brave, and true, and steadfast. We will tell them of liberty.' So I have come to you, and I am glad to see you. Alexander Alexandrovitch, pass the bottle down the table. You see, little fathers, I have not come begging for your money. No; keep your kopecks in your pocket. We do not want your money. We are no tchinovniks. We prove it by giving you vodka to keep your throats wet and your ears open. Fill up your glasses—fill up your glasses."

The little fathers of Osterno understood this part of the harangue perfectly, and acted upon it.

The orator scratched his head reflectively. There was a certain business-like mouthing of his periods, showing that he had learnt all this by heart. He did not press all his points home in the manner of one speaking from his own brain.

"I see before me," he went on, without an over-plus of sequence, "men worthy to take their place among the rulers of the world—eh—er—rulers of the world, little fathers."

He paused and drank half a tumbler of vodka. His last statement was so obviously inapplicable—what he actually did see was so very far removed

from what he said he saw—that he decided to relinquish the point.

"I drink," he cried, "to Liberty and Equality!"

Some of the little fathers also drank, to assuage an hereditary thirst.

"And now," continued the orator, "let us get to business. I think we understand each other?"

He looked round with an engaging smile upon faces brutal enough to suit his purpose, but quite devoid of intelligence. There was not much understanding there.

"The poor man has only one way of making himself felt—force. We have worked for generations, we have toiled in silence, and we have gathered strength. The time has now come for us to put forth our strength. The time has gone by for merely asking for what we want. We asked, and they heard us not. We will now go and take!"

A few who had heard the speech or something like it before shouted their applause at this moment. Before the noise had subsided the door opened, and two or three men pushed their way into the already overcrowded room.

"Come in, come in!" cried the orator; "the more the better. You are all welcome. All we require, then, little fathers, is organisation. There are nine

hundred souls in Osterno; are you going to bow down before one man? All men are equal—moujik and bárin, krestyanin and prince. Why do you not go up to the castle that frowns down upon the village, and tell the man there that you are starving, that he must feed you, that you are not going to work from dawn till eve while he sits on his velvet couch and smokes his gold-tipped cigarettes. Why do you not go and tell him that you are not going to starve and die while he eats caviare and peaches from gold plates and dishes?"

A resounding bang of the fist finished this fine oration, and again the questions were unanswered.

"They are all the same, these aristocrats," the man thundered on. "Your Prince is as the others, I make no doubt. Indeed, I know; for I have been told by our good friend Abramitch here. A clever man, our friend Abramitch, and when you get your liberty —when you get your Mir—you must keep him in mind. Your Prince, then—this Howard-Alexis—treats you like the dirt beneath his feet. Is it not so? He will not listen to your cry of hunger. He will not give you a few crumbs of food from his gold dishes. He will not give you a few kopecks of the millions of roubles that he possesses. And where

did he get those roubles? Ah! where did he get them—eh? Tell me that."

Again the interrogative unwashed fist. As the orator's wild and frenzied eye travelled round the room it lighted on a form near the door—a man standing a head and shoulders above anyone in the room, a man enveloped in an old brown coat, with a woollen shawl round his throat hiding half his face.

"Who is that?" cried the orator, with an unsteady, pointing finger. "He is no moujik. Is that a tchinovnik, little fathers? Has he come here to our meeting to spy upon us?"

"You may ask them who I am," replied the giant. "They know; they will tell you. It is not the first time that I tell them they are fools. I tell them again now. They are fools and worse to listen to such windbags as you."

"Who is it?" cried the paid agitator. "Who is this man?"

His eyes were red with anger and with vodka; his voice was unsteady. His outstretched hand shook.

"It is the Moscow Doctor," said a man beside him—"the Moscow Doctor."

"Then I say he is no doctor," shouted the orator. "He is a spy—a Government spy, a tchinovnik. He

has heard all we have said. He has seen you all. Brothers, that man must not leave this room alive. If he does, you are lost men."

Some few of the more violent spirits rose and pressed tumultuously towards the door. The agitator shouted and screamed, urging them on, taking good care to remain in the safe background himself. Every man in the room rose to his feet. They were full of vodka and fury and ignorance. Spirit and tall talk taken on an empty stomach are dangerous stimulants.

Paul stood with his back to the door and never moved.

"Sit down, fools!" he cried. "Sit down. Listen to me. You dare not touch me; you know that."

It seemed that he was right, for they stopped with staring, stupid eyes and idle hands.

"Will you listen to me, whom you have known for years, or to this talker from the town? Choose now. I am tired of you. I have been patient with you for years. You are sheep; are you fools also, to be dazzled by the words of an idle talker who promises all and gives nothing?"

There was a sullen silence. Paul had lost his power over them, and he knew it. He was quite cool and watchful. He knew that he was in danger.

These men were wild and ignorant. They were mad with drink and the brave words of the agitator.

"Choose now!" he shouted, feeling for the handle of the door behind his back.

They made no sign, but watched the faces of their leaders.

"If I go now," said Paul, "I never come again."

He opened the door. The men whom he had nursed and clothed and fed, whose lives he had saved again and again, stood sullen and silent.

Paul passed slowly out and closed the door behind him. Without it was dark and still. There would be a moon presently, and in the meantime it was beginning to freeze harder than ever.

Paul walked slowly up the village street, while two men emerged separately from the darkness of by-lanes and followed him. He did not heed them. He was not aware that the thermometer stood somewhere below zero. He did not even trouble to draw on his fur gloves.

He felt like a man whose own dogs have turned against him. The place that these peasants had occupied in his heart had been precisely that vacancy which is filled by dogs and horses in the hearts of many men. There was in his feeling for them that

knowledge of a complete dependence by which young children draw and hold a mother's love.

Paul Howard-Alexis was not a man to analyse his thoughts. A strong man is usually ignorant of the existence of his own feelings. He is never conscious of them. Paul walked slowly through the village of Osterno and realised in his uncompromising honesty that of the nine hundred men who lived therein there were not three upon whom he could rely. He had upheld his peasants for years against the cynic truths of Karl Steinmetz. He had resolutely refused to admit even to himself that they were as devoid of gratitude as they were of wisdom. And this was the end of all.

One of the men following him hurried on and caught him up.

"Excellency," he gasped, breathless with his haste, "you must not come here alone any longer. I am afraid of them—I have no control."

Paul paused, and suited his pace to the shorter legs of his companion.

"Starosta!" he said. "Is that you?"

"Yes, Excellency. I saw you go into the kabák, so I waited outside and watched. I did not dare to go inside. They will not allow me there. They are afraid that I should give information."

"How long have these meetings been going on?"

"The last three nights, Excellency, in Osterno; but it is the same all over the estate."

"Only on the estate?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, Excellency."

Paul walked on in silence for some paces. The third man followed them without catching them up.

"I do not understand, Excellency," said the Starosta anxiously. "It is not the Nihilists."

"No; it is not the Nihilists."

"And they do not want money, Excellency; that seems strange."

"Very," admitted Paul ironically.

"And they give vodka."

This seemed to be the chief stumbling-block in the Starosta's road to a solution of the mystery.

"Find out for me," said Paul after a pause, "who this man is, where he comes from, and how much he is paid to open his mouth. We will pay him more to shut it. Find out as much as you can and let me know to-morrow."

"I will try, Excellency; but I have little hope of succeeding. They distrust me. They send the chil-

dren to my shop for what they want, and the little ones have evidently been told not to chatter. The moujiks avoid me when they meet me. What can I do?"

"You can show them that you are not afraid of them," answered Paul. "That goes a long way with the moujik."

They walked on together through the lane of cottages, where furtive forms lurked in doorways and behind curtains. And Paul had only one word of advice to give, upon which he harped continually: "Be thou very courageous—be thou very courageous." Nothing new, for so it was written in the oldest book of all. The Starosta was a timorous man, needing such strong support as his master gave him from time to time.

At the great gates of the park they paused, and Paul gave the Mayor of Osterno a few last words of advice. While they were standing there the third man, who had been following, joined them.

"Is that you, Steinmetz?" asked Paul, his hand thrust with suspicious speed into his jacket pocket.

"Yes."

"What are you doing here?"

"Watching you," answered Karl Steinmetz in his

mild way. "It is no longer safe for either of us to go about alone. It was mere foolery your going to that kabák."

CHAPTER XIV.

À TROIS.

Of all the rooms in the great castle Etta liked the morning-room best. Persons of a troubled mind usually love to look upon a wide prospect. The mind, no doubt, fears the unseen approach of detection or danger, and transmits this dread to the eye, which likes to command a wide view all around.

The great drawing-room was only used after dinner. Until that time the ladies spent the day either in their own apartments or in the morning-room looking over the cliff. Here, while the cold weather lasted, Etta had tea served, and thither the gentlemen usually repaired at the hour set apart for the homely meal. They had come regularly the last few evenings. Paul and Steinmetz had suddenly given up their long drives to distant parts of the estate.

Here the whole party was assembled on the Sunday afternoon following Paul's visit to the village

kabák, and to them came an unexpected guest. The door was thrown open, and Claude de Chauxville, pale, but self-possessed and quiet, came into the room. The perfect ease of his manner bespoke a practised familiarity with the position difficult. His last parting with Paul and Steinmetz had been, to say the least of it, strained. Maggie, he knew, disliked and distrusted him. Etta hated and feared him.

He was in riding costume—a short fur jacket, fur gloves, a cap in his hand, and a silver-mounted crop. A fine figure of a man—smart, well turned out, well-groomed—a gentleman.

"Prince," he said frankly, "I have come to throw myself upon your generosity. Will you lend me a horse? I was riding in the forest when my horse fell over a root and lamed himself. I found I was only three miles from Osterno, so I came. My misfortune must be my excuse for this—intrusion."

Paul performed graciously enough that which charity and politeness demanded of him. There are plenty of people who trade unscrupulously upon these demands, but it is probable that they mostly have their reward. Love and friendship are stronger than charity and politeness, and those who trade upon the latter are rarely accorded the former.

So Paul ignored the probability that De Chauxville had lamed his horse on purpose, and offered him refreshment while his saddle was being transferred to the back of a fresh mount. Farther than that he did not go. He did not consider himself called upon to offer a night's hospitality to the man who had attempted to murder him a week before.

With engaging frankness De Chauxville accepted everything. It is an art soon acquired and soon abused. Steinmetz suggested that perhaps Monsieur de Chauxville had lunched sparsely, and the Frenchman admitted that such was the case, but that he loved afternoon tea above all meals.

"It is so innocent and simple, I know. I have the same feeling myself," concurred Steinmetz courteously.

"Do you ride about the country much alone?" asked Paul while the servants were setting before this uninvited guest a few more substantial delicacies.

"Ah, no, Prince. This is my first attempt, and if it had not procured me this pleasure I should say that it will be my last."

"It is easy to lose yourself," said Paul; "besides" —and the two friends watched the Frenchman's

face closely—"besides, the country is disturbed at present."

De Chauxville was helping himself daintily to *pâté de foie gras.*

"Ah, indeed. Is that so?" he answered. "But they would not hurt me—a stranger in the land."

"And an orphan, too, I have no doubt," added Steinmetz, with a laugh. "But would the moujik pause to inquire, my very dear De Chauxville?"

"At all events, I should not pause to answer," replied the Frenchman in the same light tone. "I should evacuate. Ah, Mademoiselle," he went on, addressing Maggie, "they have been attempting to frighten you, I suspect, with their stories of disturbed peasantry. It is to keep up the lurid local colour. They must have their romance, these Russians."

And so the ball was kept rolling. There was never any lack of conversation when Steinmetz and De Chauxville were together, nor was the talk without a subtle sub-flavour of acidity. At length the centre of attention himself diverted that attention. He inaugurated an argument over the best cross-country route from Osterno to Thors, which sent Steinmetz out of the room for a map. During the absence of the watchful German he admired the view

from the window, and this strategic movement enabled him to say to Etta aside:

"I must see you before I leave the house; it is absolutely necessary."

Not long after the return of Steinmetz and the final decision respecting the road to Thors, Etta left the room, and a few minutes later the servant announced that the Baron's horse was at the door.

De Chauxville took his leave at once, with many assurances of everlasting gratitude.

"Kindly," he added, "make my adieux to the Princess; I will not trouble her."

Quite by accident he met Etta at the head of the state staircase, and expressed such admiration for the castle that she opened the door of the large drawing-room and took him to see that apartment.

"What I arranged for Thursday is for the day after to-morrow—Tuesday," said De Chauxville as soon as they were alone. "We cannot keep them back any longer. You understand—the side door to be opened at seven o'clock. Ah! who is this?"

They both turned. Steinmetz was standing behind them, but he could not have heard De Chauxville's words. He closed the door carefully, and came forward with his grim smile.

"À nous trois!" he said, and the subsequent con-

versation was in a language in which these three understood each other best.

De Chauxville bit his lip and waited. It was a moment of the tensest suspense.

"À nous trois!" repeated Steinmetz. "De Chauxville, you love an epigram. The man who overestimates the foolishness of others is himself the biggest fool concerned. A lame horse—the Prince's generosity—making your adieux. *Mon Dieu!* you should know me better than that after all these years. No, you need not look at the door. No one will interrupt us. I have seen to that."

His attitude and manner indicated a complete mastery of the situation, but whether this assumption was justified by fact or was a mere trick it was impossible to say. There was in the man something strong and good and calm—a manner never acquired by one who has anything to conceal. His dignity was perfect. One forgot his stoutness, his heavy breathing, his ungainly size. He was essentially manly, and a presence to be feared. The strength of his will made itself felt.

He turned to the Princess with the grave courtesy that always marked his attitude towards her.

"Madame," he said, "I fully recognise your cleverness in raising yourself to the position you now oc-

cupy. But I would remind you that that position carries with it certain obligations. It is hardly dignified for a Princess to engage herself in a vulgar love intrigue in her own house."

"It is not a vulgar love intrigue," cried Etta, with blazing eyes. "I will not allow you to say that. Where is your boasted friendship? Is this a sample of it?"

Karl Steinmetz bowed gravely, with outspread hands.

"Madame, that friendship is at your service, now as always."

De Chauxville gave a scornful little laugh. He was biting the end of his moustache as he watched Etta's face. For a moment the woman stood—not the first to stand thus—between two fears. Then she turned to Steinmetz. The victory was his—the greatest he had ever torn from the grasp of Claude de Chauxville.

"You know," she said, "that this man has me in his power."

"You alone. But not both of us together," answered Steinmetz.

De Chauxville looked uneasy. He gave a careless little laugh.

"My good Steinmetz, you allow your imagination

to run away with you. You interfere in what does not concern you."

"My very dear De Chauxville, I think not. At all events, I am going to continue to interfere."

Etta looked from one to the other. She had at the first impulse gone over to Steinmetz. She was now meditating drawing back. If De Chauxville kept cool all might yet be well—the dread secret of the probability of Sydney Bamborough being alive might still be withheld from Steinmetz. For the moment it would appear that she was about to occupy the ignominious position of the bone of contention. If these two men were going to use her as a mere excuse to settle a lifelong quarrel of many issues, it was probable that there would not be much left of her character by the time that they had finished.

She had to decide quickly. She decided to assume the rôle of peacemaker.

"Monsieur de Chauxville was on the point of going," she said. "Let him go."

"Monsieur de Chauxville is not going until I have finished with him, Madame. This may be the last time we meet. I hope it is."

De Chauxville looked uneasy. His was a ready wit, and fear was the only feeling that paralysed it. Etta looked at him. Was his wit going to desert

him now when he most needed it? He had ridden boldly into the lion's den. Such a proceeding requires a certain courage, but a higher form of intrepidity is required to face the lion standing before the exit.

De Chauxville looked at Steinmetz with shifty eyes. He was very like the mask of the lynx in the smoking-room, even to the self-conscious, deprecatory smile on the countenance of the forest sneak.

"Keep your temper," he said; "do not let us quarrel in the presence of a lady."

"No; we will keep the quarrel till afterwards."

Steinmetz turned to Etta.

"Princess," he said, "will you now, in my presence, forbid this man to come to this or any other house of yours? Will you forbid him to address himself either by speech or letter to you again?"

"You know I cannot do that," replied Etta.

"Why not?"

Etta made no answer.

"Because," replied De Chauxville for her, "the Princess is too wise to make an enemy of me. In that respect she is wiser than you. She knows that I could send you and your Prince to Siberia.

Steinmetz laughed.

"Nonsense!" he said. "Princess," he went on, "if you think that the fact of De Chauxville numbering among his friends a few obscure police spies gives him the right to persecute you, you are mistaken. Our friend is very clever, but he can do no harm with the little that he knows of the Charity League."

Etta remained silent. The silence made Steinmetz frown.

"Princess," he said gravely, "you were very indignant just now because I made so bold as to put the most natural construction upon the circumstances in which I found you. It was a pre-arranged meeting between De Chauxville and yourself. If the meeting was not the outcome of an intrigue such as I mentioned, nor the result of this man's hold over you on account of the Charity League, what was it? What was it? I beg of you to answer."

Etta made no reply. Instead, she raised her eyes and looked at De Chauxville.

"Without going into affairs which do not concern you," said the Frenchman, answering for her, "I think you will recognise that the secret of the Charity League was quite sufficient excuse for me to request a few minutes alone with the Princess."

Of this Steinmetz took no notice. He was standing in front of Etta, between De Chauxville and the

door. His broad, deeply-lined face was flushed with the excitement of the moment. His great mournful eyes, yellow and drawn with much reading and the hardships of a rigorous climate, were fixed anxiously on her face.

Etta was not looking at him. Her eyes were turned towards the window, but they did not see with comprehension. She was stony and stubborn.

"Princess," said Steinmetz, "answer me before it is too late. Has De Chauxville any other hold over you?"

Etta nodded, and the little action brought a sudden gleam to the Frenchman's eyes.

"If," said Steinmetz, looking from one to the other, "if you two have been deceiving Paul I will have no mercy—I warn you of that."

Etta turned on him.

"Can you not believe me?" she cried. "I have practised no deception in common with Monsieur de Chauxville."

"The Charity League is quite enough for you, my friend," put in the Frenchman hurriedly.

"You know no more of the Charity League than you did before—than the whole world knew before—except this lady's share in the disposal of the papers," said Steinmetz.

"And this lady's share in the disposal of the papers will not be welcome news to the Prince," answered De Chauxville.

"Welcome or unwelcome, he shall be told of it to-night."

Etta looked round sharply, her lips apart and trembling.

"By whom?" asked De Chauxville.

"By me," replied Steinmetz.

There was a momentary pause. De Chauxville and Etta exchanged a glance. Etta felt that she was lost. This Frenchman was not one to spare either man or woman from any motive of charity or chivalry.

"Even if that is so," he said, "the Princess is not relieved from the embarrassment of her situation."

"No?"

"No, my astute friend. There is a little matter connected with Sydney Bamborough which has come to my knowledge."

Etta moved, but she said nothing. The sound of her breathing was startlingly loud.

"Ah! Sydney Bamborough," said Steinmetz slowly. "What about him?"

"He is not dead; that is all."

Karl Steinmetz passed his broad hand down over his face, covering his mouth for a second.

"But he died. He was found on the steppe, and buried at Tver."

"So the story runs," said De Chauxville, with easy sarcasm. "But who found him on the steppe? Who buried him at Tver?"

"*I* did, my friend."

The next second Steinmetz staggered back a step or two as Etta fell heavily into his arms. But he never took his eyes off De Chauxville.

CHAPTER XIV.

À DEUX.

STEINMETZ laid Etta on a sofa. She was already recovering consciousness. He rang the bell twice, and all the while he kept his eye on De Chauxville. A quick touch on Etta's wrist and breast showed that this man knew something of women and of those short-lived fainting fits that belong to strong emotions.

The maid soon came.

"The Princess requires your attention," said Steinmetz, still watching De Chauxville, who was looking at Etta and neglecting his opportunities.

Steinmetz went up to him and took him by the arm.

"Come with me," he said.

The Frenchman could have taken advantage of the presence of the servant to effect a retreat, but he did not dare to do so. It was essential that he should obtain a few words with Etta. To effect this he was ready even to face an interview with Stein-

metz. In his heart he was cursing that liability to inconvenient fainting fits that makes all women uncertain in a moment of need.

He preceded Steinmetz out of the room, forgetting even to resent the large warm grasp on his arm. They went through the long dimly-lit passage to the old part of the castle, where Steinmetz had his rooms.

"And now," said Steinmetz, when they were alone with closed doors—"and now, De Chauxville, let us understand each other."

De Chauxville shrugged his shoulders. He was not thinking of Steinmetz yet. He was still thinking of Etta and how he could get speech with her. With the assurance which had carried him through many a difficulty before this, the Frenchman looked round him, taking in the details of the room. They were in the apartment beyond the large smoking-room—the ante-room, as it were, to the little chamber where Paul kept his medicine-chest, his disguise, all the compromising details of his work among the peasants. The broad writing-table in the middle of the room stood between the two men."

"Do you imagine yourself in love with the Princess?" asked Steinmetz suddenly, with characteristic bluntness.

"If you like," returned the other.

"If I thought it was that," said the German, looking at him thoughtfully, "I would throw you out of the window. If it is anything else, I will only throw you downstairs."

De Chauxville bit his thumbnail anxiously. He frowned across the table into Steinmetz's face. In all their intercourse he had never heard that tone of voice; he had never seen quite that look on the heavy face. Was Steinmetz aroused at last? Steinmetz aroused was an unknown quantity to Claude de Chauxville.

"I have known you now for twenty-five years," went on Karl Steinmetz, "and I cannot say that I know any good of you. But let that pass; it is not, I suppose, my business. The world is as the good God made it. I can do nothing towards bettering it. I have always known you to be a scoundrel—a fact to be deplored—and that is all. But so soon as your villainy affects my own life, then, my friend, a more active recognition of it is necessary."

"Indeed!" sneered the Frenchman.

"Your villainy has touched Paul's life, and at that point it touches mine," continued Karl Steinmetz with slow anger. "You followed us to Petersburg—thence you dogged us to the Government of

Tver. You twisted that foolish woman, the Countess Lanovitch, round your finger, and obtained from her an invitation to Thors. All this in order to be near one of us. *Ach!* I have been watching you. Is it only after twenty-five years that I at last convince you that I am not such a fool as you are pleased to consider me?"

"You have not convinced me yet," put in De Chauxville, with his easy laugh.

"No, but I shall do so before I have finished with you. Now, you have not come here for nothing. It is to be near one of us. It is not Miss Delafield; she knows you. Some women—good women—have an instinct given to them by God for a defence against such men—such things as you. Is it I?"

He touched his broad chest with his two hands, and stood defying his lifelong foe.

"Is it me that you follow? If so, I am here. Let us have done with it now."

De Chauxville laughed. There was an uneasy look in his eyes. He did not quite understand Steinmetz. He made no answer. But he turned and looked at the window. It is possible that he suddenly remembered the threat concerning it.

"Is it Paul?" continued Steinmetz. "I think not. I think you are afraid of Paul. Remains the

Princess. Unless you can convince me to the contrary, I must conclude that you are trying to get a helpless woman into your power."

"You always were a champion of helpless ladies," sneered De Chauxville.

"Ah! You remember that, do you? I also—I remember it. It is long ago, and I have forgiven you; but I have not forgotten. What you were then you will be now. Your record is against you."

Steinmetz was standing with his back to what appeared to be the only exit from the room. There were two other doors concealed in the oaken panels, but De Chauxville did not know that. He could not take his eyes from the broad face of his companion, upon which there were singular blotches of colour.

"I am waiting," said the German, "for you to explain your conduct."

"Indeed!" replied De Chauxville. "Then, my friend, you will have to continue waiting. I fail to recognise your right to make inquiry into my movements. I am not responsible to any man for my actions, least of all to you. The man who manages his neighbour's affairs mismanages his own. I would recommend you to mind your own business. Kindly let me pass."

De Chauxville's words were brave enough, but

his lips were unsteady. A weak mouth is apt to betray its possessor at inconvenient moments. He waved Steinmetz aside, but he made no movement towards the door. He kept the table between him and his companion.

Steinmetz was getting calmer. There was an uncanny hush about him.

"Then I am to conclude," he said, "that you came to Russia in order to persecute a helpless woman. Her innocence or her guilt are, for the moment, beside the question. Neither is any business of yours. Both, on the contrary, are my affair. Innocent or guilty, the Princess Howard-Alexis must from this moment be freed from your persecution."

De Chauxville shrugged his shoulders. He tapped on the floor impatiently with the toe of his neat riding-boot.

"*Allons!*" he said. "Let me pass."

"Your story of Sidney Bamborough," went on Steinmetz coldly, "was a good one wherewith to frighten a panic-stricken woman. But you brought it to the wrong person when you brought it to me. Do you suppose that I would have allowed the marriage to take place unless I knew that Bamborough was dead?"

"You may be telling the truth about that in-

cident, or you may not," said De Chauxville. "But my knowledge of the betrayal of the Charity League is sufficient for my purpose."

"Yes," admitted Steinmetz grimly, "you have information there with possibilities of mischief in it. But I shall discount most of it by telling Prince Pavlo to-night all that I know, and I know more than you do. Also, I intend to seal your lips before you leave this room."

De Chauxville stared at him with a dropping lip. He gulped down something in his throat. His hand was stealing round under the fur jacket to a pocket at the back of his trousers.

"Let me out!" he hissed.

There was a gleam of bright metal in the sunlight that poured in through the window. De Chauxville raised his arm sharply, and at the same instant Steinmetz threw a book in his face. A loud report, and the room was full of smoke.

Steinmetz placed one hand on the table and, despite his weight, vaulted it cleanly. This man had taken his degree at Heidelberg, and the Germans are the finest gymnasts in the world. Moreover, muscle, once made, remains till death. It was his only chance, for the Frenchman had dodged the novel, though it had spoilt his aim. Steinmetz

vaulted right on to him, and De Chauxville staggered back.

In a moment Steinmetz had him by the collar; his face was grey, his heavy eyes ablaze. If anything will rouse a man, it is being fired at point-blank at a range of four yards with a 280 revolver.

"*Ach!*" gasped the German; "you would shoot me, would you?"

He wrenched the pistol from De Chauxville's fingers and threw it into the corner of the room. Then he shook the man like a garment.

"First," he cried, "you would kill Paul, and now you try to shoot me. Good God! what are you? You are no man. Do you know what I am going to do with you? I am going to thrash you like a dog!"

He dragged him to the fireplace. Above the mantelpiece a stick-rack was affixed to the wall, and here were sticks and riding-whips. Steinmetz selected a heavy whip. His eyes were shot with blood; his mouth worked beneath his moustache.

"So," he said, "I am going to settle with you at last."

De Chauxville kicked and struggled, but he could not get free. He only succeeded in half-choking himself.

"You are going to swear," said Steinmetz, "never to approach the Princess again—never to divulge what you know of her past life."

The Frenchman was almost blue in the face. His eyes were wild with terror.

And Karl Steinmetz thrashed him.

It did not last long. No word was spoken. The silence was only broken by their shuffling feet, by the startling report of each blow, by De Chauxville's repeated gasps of pain.

The fur jacket was torn in several places. The white shirt appeared here and there. In one place it was stained with red.

At last Steinmetz threw him huddled into one corner of the room. The chattering face, the wild eyes that looked up at him, were terrible to see.

"When you have promised to keep the secret you may go," said Steinmetz. "You must swear it."

De Chauxville's lips moved, but no sound came from them. Steinmetz poured some water into a tumbler and gave it to him.

"It had to come to this," he said, "sooner or later. Paul would have killed you; that is the only difference. Do you swear by God in heaven above you that you will keep the Princess's secret?"

"I swear it," answered De Chauxville hoarsely.

Steinmetz was holding on to the back of a high chair with both hands, breathing heavily. His face was still livid. That which had been white in his eyes was quite red.

De Chauxville was crawling towards the revolver in the corner of the room, but he was almost fainting. It was a question whether he would last long enough to reach the firearm. There was a bright patch of red in either liver-coloured cheek; his lips were working convulsively. And Steinmetz saw him in time. He seized him by the collar of his coat and dragged him back. He placed his foot on the little pistol and faced De Chauxville with glaring eyes. De Chauxville rose to his feet, and for a moment the two men looked into each other's souls. The Frenchman's face was twisted with pain. No word was said.

Such was the last reckoning between Karl Steinmetz and the Baron Claude de Chauxville.

The Frenchman went slowly towards the door. He faltered, and looked round for a chair. He sat heavily down with a little exclamation of pain and exhaustion, and felt for his pocket-handkerchief. The scented cambric diffused a faint, dainty colour of violets. He sat forward with his two hands on his

knees, swaying a little from side to side. Presently he raised his handkerchief to his eyes. There were tears in his eyes.

Thus the two men waited until De Chauxville had recovered himself sufficiently to take his departure. The air was full of naked human passions.

At last the Frenchman stood slowly up, and, with characteristic thought of appearances, fingered his torn coat.

"Have you a cloak?" asked Steinmetz.

"No."

The German went to a cupboard in the wall and selected a long riding-cloak, which he handed to the Frenchman without a word.

Thus Claude de Chauxville walked to the door in a cloak which had figured at many a Charity League meeting. Assuredly the irony of Fate is a keener thing than any poor humour we have at our command. When evil is punished in this present life there is no staying of the hand.

Steinmetz followed De Chauxville through the long passage they had traversed a few minutes earlier and down the broad staircase. The servants were waiting at the door with the horse placed at the Frenchman's disposal by Paul.

De Chauxville mounted slowly, heavily, with

twitching lips. His face was set and cold now. The pain was getting bearable, the wounded vanity was bleeding inwardly. In his dull eyes there was a gleam of hatred and malice. It was the face of a man rejoicing inwardly over a deep and certain vengeance.

"It is well," he was muttering between his clenched teeth as he rode away, while Steinmetz watched him from the doorstep. "It is well. Now I will not spare you."

He rode down the hill and through the village with the light of the setting sun shining on a face where pain and deadly rage were fighting for the mastery.

CHAPTER XV.

A TALE THAT IS TOLD.

KARL STEINMETZ walked slowly upstairs to his own room. The evening sun shining through the small deeply-embrasured windows fell on a face at no time joyous, now tired and worn. He sat down at his broad writing-table, and looked round the room with a little blink of the eyelids.

"I am getting too old for this sort of thing," he said.

His gaze lighted on the heavy riding-whip thrown on the ground near the door where he had released Claude de Chauxville, after the terrible punishment meted out to that foe with heavy Teutonic hand. Steinmetz rose, and picking up the whip with the grunt of a stout man stooping, replaced it carefully in the rack over the mantelpiece.

He stood looking out of the window for a few moments.

"It will have to be done," he said resolutely, and rang the bell.

"My compliments to the Prince," he said to his servant, who appeared instantly, "and will he come to me here."

When Paul came into the room a few minutes later Steinmetz was standing by the fire. He turned and looked gravely at the Prince.

"I have just kicked De Chauxville out of the house," he said.

The colour left Paul's face quite suddenly.

"Why?" he asked with hard eyes. He had begun to distrust Etta, and there is nothing so hard to stop as the growth of distrust.

Steinmetz did not answer at once.

"Was it not *my* privilege?" asked Paul with a grim smile. There are some smiles more terrible than any frown.

"No," answered Steinmetz; "I think not. It is not as bad as that. But it is bad enough, *mein lieber!*—it is bad enough! I horsewhipped him first for myself. *Gott!* how pleasant that was! And then I kicked him out for you."

"Why?" repeated Paul with a white face.

"It is a long story," answered Steinmetz without looking at him. "He knows too much."

"About whom?"

"About all of us."

Paul walked to the window. He stood looking out, his hands thrust into side-pockets of his jacket, his broad back turned uncompromisingly upon his companion.

"Tell me the story," he said. "You need not hurry over it. You need not trouble to—spare me. Only let it be quite complete—once for all."

Steinmetz winced. He knew the expression of the face that was looking out of the window.

"This man has hated me all his life," he said. "It began as such things usually do between men—about a woman. It was years ago. I got the better of him, and the good God got the better of me. She died, and De Chauxville forgot her. I—have not forgotten her. But I have tried to do so. It is a slow process, and I have made very little progress; but all that is my affair, and beside the question. I merely mention it to show you that De Chauxville had a grudge against me——"

"This is no time for mistaken charity," interrupted Paul. "Do not try to screen anybody. I shall see through it."

There was a little pause. Never had that silent room been so noiseless.

"In after-life," Steinmetz went on, it was our fate to be at variance several times. Our mutual

dislike has had no opportunity of diminishing. It seems that, before you married, De Chauxville was pleased to consider himself in love with Mrs. Sydney Bamborough. Whether he had any right to think himself ill-used I do not know. Such matters are usually known to two persons only, and imperfectly by them. It would appear that the wound to his vanity was serious. It developed into a thirst for revenge. He looked about for some means to do you harm. He communicated with your enemies, and allied himself to such men as Vassili of Paris. He followed us to Petersburg, and then he had a stroke of good fortune. He found out—who betrayed the Charity League!"

Paul turned slowly round. In his eyes there burned a dull, hungering fire. Men have seen such a look in the eyes of a beast of prey, driven, famished, cornered at last, and at last face to face with its foe.

"Ah! He knows that!" he said slowly.

"Yes, God help us! he knows that."

"And who was it."

Steinmetz moved uneasily from one foot to the other.

"It was a woman," he said.

"A woman!"

"A woman—you know," said Steinmetz slowly.

"Catrina!"

"No, not Catrina!"

"Then who?" cried Paul hoarsely. His hands fell heavily on the table.

"Your wife."

Paul knew before the words were spoken.

He turned again, and stood looking out of the window with his hands thrust into his pockets. He stood there for whole minutes in an awful stillness. The clock on the mantelpiece, a little travelling timepiece, ticked in a hurried way, as if anxious to get on. Down beneath them, somewhere in the courtyards of the great castle, a dog—a deep-voiced wolf-hound—was baying persistently and nervously, listening for the echo of its own voice amid the pines of the desert forest.

Steinmetz watched Paul's motionless back with a sort of fascination. He moved uneasily, as if to break a spell of silence almost unbearable in its intensity. He went to the table and sat down. From mere habit he took up a quill pen. He looked at the point of it and at the inkstand. But he had nothing to write. There was nothing to say.

He laid the pen aside, and sat leaning his broad head upon the palm of his hand, his two elbows on

the table. Paul never moved. Steinmetz waited. His own life had been no great success. He had had much to bear, and he had borne it. He was wondering heavily whether any of it had been as bad as what Paul was bearing now while he looked out of the window with his hands in his pockets, saying nothing.

At length Paul moved. He turned, and, coming towards the table, laid his hand on Steinmetz's broad shoulder.

"Are you sure of it?" he asked in a voice that did not sound like his own at all—a hollow voice like that of an old man.

"Quite; I have it from Stepán Lanovitch—from the Princess herself.

They remained thus for a moment. Then Paul withdrew his hand, and walked slowly to the window.

"Tell me," he said, "how she did it."

Steinmetz was playing with the quill pen again. It is singular how at great moments we perform trivial acts, think trivial thoughts. He dipped the pen in the ink, and made a pattern on the blotting-pad with dots.

"It was an organised plan between husband and wife," he said. "Bamborough turned up at Thors and asked for a night's lodging on the strength of

a very small acquaintance. He stole the papers from Stepán's study and took them to Tver, where his wife was waiting for them. She carried them on to Paris and sold them to Vassili. Bamborough began his journey eastward, knowing presumably that he could not escape by the western frontier, but lost his way on the steppe. You remember the man whom we picked up between here and Tver with his face all cut to pieces?—he had been dragged by the stirrup. That was Sydney Bamborough. Fate had hit back quickly."

"How long have you known this?" asked Paul in a queer voice.

"I saw it suddenly in the Princess's face, one day in Petersburg—a sort of revelation. I read it there, and she saw me reading. I should have liked to keep it from you, for your sake as well as for hers. Our daily life is made possible only by the fact that we know so little of our neighbours. There are many things of which we are better ignorant right up to the end. This might have been one of them. But De Chauxville found it out, and it is better that I should tell you than he."

Paul did not look round. The wolf-hound was still barking at its own echo—a favourite pastime of those who make a great local stir in the world.

"Of course," said Paul, after a long pause, "I have been a fool. I know that. But——"

He turned and looked at Steinmetz with haggard eyes.

"But I would rather go on being a fool than suspect anyone of a deception like this."

Steinmetz was still making patterns on the blotting-pad.

"It is difficult for us men," he said slowly, "to look at these things from a woman's point of view. They hold a different sense of honour from ours—especially if they are beautiful. And the fault is ours—especially towards the beautiful ones. There may have been temptations of which we are ignorant."

Steinmetz looked up slowly, and saw that Paul had grown ten years older in the last few minutes. He did not glance at him for more than a second, because the sight of Paul's face hurt him. But he saw in that moment that Paul did not understand. This strong man, hard in his youthful strength of limb and purpose, would be just, but nothing more. And between man and man it is not always justice that is required. Between man and woman justice rarely meets the difficulty.

"Comprendre c'est pardonner," quoted Steinmetz vaguely.

He hesitated to interfere between Paul and his wife. Axioms are made for crucial moments. A man's life has been steered by a proverb before this. Some, who have no religion, steer by them all the voyage.

Paul walked slowly to the chair he usually occupied, opposite to Steinmetz, at the writing-table. He walked and sat down as if he had travelled a long distance.

"What is to be done?" asked Steinmetz.

"I do not know. I do not think that it matters much. What do you recommend?"

"There is so much to be done," answered Steinmetz, "that it is difficult to know what to do first. We must not forget that De Chauxville is furious. He will do all the harm of which he is capable, at once. We must not forget that the country is in a state of smouldering revolt, and that we have two women, two English ladies, entrusted to our care."

Paul moved uneasily in his chair. His companion had struck the right note. This man was happiest when he was tiring himself out."

"Yes; but about Etta?" he said.

And the sound of his voice made Steinmetz wince.

There is nothing so heartrending as the sight of dumb suffering.

"You must see her," answered he, reflectively. "You must see her, of course. She may be able to explain."

He looked across the table beneath his shaggy grey eyebrows. Paul did not at that moment look a likely subject for explanations—even the explanations of a beautiful woman. But there was one human quantity which, in all his experience, Karl Steinmetz had never successfully gauged—namely, the extent of a woman's power over the man who loves, or, at one time, has loved her.

"She cannot explain away Stepán Lanovitch's ruined life. She can hardly explain away a thousand deaths from unnatural causes every winter in this province alone."

This was what Steinmetz dreaded—justice.

"Give her the opportunity," he said.

Paul was looking out of the window.

"I will if you like," he said.

"I do like, Paul. I beg of you to do it. And remember that—she is not a man."

This, like other appeals of the same nature, fell on stony ground. Paul simply did not understand it. In all the years of his work among the peasants it

is possible that some well-spring of conventional charity had been dried up—scorched in the glare of burning injustice. He was not at this moment in a mood to consider the only excuse that Steinmetz seemed to be able to urge.

The sun had set long ago. The short twilight lay over the snow-covered land with a chill hopelessness. Steinmetz looked at his watch. They had been together an hour—one of those hours that count as years in a life-time. He had to peer into the face of the watch in order to see the hands. The room was almost dark, and no servant ever came to it unless summoned.

Paul was looking down at his companion as if waiting to hear the time. At great moments we are suddenly brought face to face with the limits of human nature. It is at such moments that we find that we are not gods, but only men. We can only feel to a certain extent, only suffer up to a certain point.

"We must dress for dinner," said Steinmetz. "Afterwards—well, afterwards we shall see."

"Yes," answered Paul. And he did not go.

The two men stood looking at each other for a moment. They had passed through much together —danger, excitement and sorrow. It would appear

that this same sorrow runs like a river across the road of our life. Some of us find the ford and plash through the shallows—shallows ourselves—while others flounder into deep water. These are they who look right on to the greater events, and fail to note the trivial details of each little step. Paul was wading through the deep water, and his friend was not inclined to stand upon the bank. It is while passing through this river that Fortune sends some of us a companion who is ever afterwards different from all others.

Paul stood looking down at the broad heavy face of the man who loved him like a father. It was not easy for him to speak. He seemed to be making an effort.

"I do not want you to think," he said at last, "that it is as bad as it might have been. Only, at present there does not seem to be much left, except you."

Steinmetz looked up with his quaintly resigned smile.

"Ah, yes;" he said, "I am there always."

CHAPTER XVI.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

KARL STEINMETZ had shown the depth of his knowledge of men and women when he commented on that power of facing danger with an unruffled countenance which he was pleased to attribute to English ladies above all women. During the evening he had full opportunity of verifying his own observations.

Etta came down to dinner smiling and imperturbable. On the threshold of the drawing-room she exchanged a glance with Karl Steinmetz; and that was all. At dinner it was Maggie and Paul who were silent. Etta talked to Steinmetz—brightly, gaily, with a certain courage of a very high order; for she was desperate, and she did not show it.

At last the evening came to an end. Maggie had sung two songs. Steinmetz had performed on the piano with a marvellous touch. All had played their parts with the brazen faces which Steinmetz in

his knowledge of many nations assigned to the Anglo-Saxon race before others.

At last Etta rose to go to bed with a little sharp sigh of great suspense. It was coming.

She went up to her room, bidding Maggie good-night in the passage. In a mechanical way she allowed the deft-handed maid to array her in a dressing-gown—soft, silken, a dainty triumph in its way. Then, almost impatiently, she sent the maid away when her hair was only half released. She would brush it herself. She was tired. No, she wanted nothing more.

She sat down by the fire. She could hardly breathe. It was coming.

She heard Paul come to his dressing-room. She heard his deep quiet voice reply to some question of his valet's. Then the word "Good-night" in the same quiet voice. The valet had gone. There was only the door now between her and—what? Her fingers were at the throat of her dressing-gown. The soft lace seemed to choke her.

Then Paul knocked at the door. It was coming. She opened her lips, but at first could make no sound.

"Come in," she said at length, hoarsely.

She wondered whether he would kill her. She

wondered whether she was in love with her husband. She had begun wondering that lately; she was wondering it when he came in. He had changed his dress-coat for a jacket in which he was in the habit of working with Steinmetz in the quiet room after the household had gone to bed.

She looked up. She dropped the brush, and ran towards him with a great rustle of her flowing silks.

"Oh, Paul, what is it?" she cried.

She stopped short, not daring to touch him, before his cold set face.

"Have you seen anyone?" she whispered.

"Only De Chauxville," he answered, "this afternoon."

"Indeed, Paul," she protested hastily, "it was nothing. A message from Catrina Lanovitch. It was only the usual visit of an acquaintance. It would have been very strange if he had not called. Do you think I could care for a man like that?"

"I never did think so until now," returned Paul steadily. "Your excuses accuse you. You may care for him. I do not know. I—do—not—care."

She turned slowly and went back to her chair. Mechanically she took up the brush and shook back her beautiful hair.

"You mean you do not care for me," she said. "Oh, Paul, be careful."

Paul stood looking at her. He was not a subtle-minded man at all. He was not one of those who take it upon themselves to say that they understand women—using the word in an offensively general sense—as if women were situated midway between the human and the animal races. He was old-fashioned enough to look upon women as higher and purer than men, while equally capable of thought and self-control. He had, it must be remembered, no great taste for fictional literature. He had not read the voluminous lucubrations of the modern woman-writer. He had not assisted at the nauseating spectacle of a woman morally turning herself inside out in three volumes and an interview.

No—this man respected women still; and he paid them an honour which, thank Heaven! most of them still deserve. He treated them as men in the sense that he considered them to be under the same code of right and wrong, of good and evil.

"I do not think," said Paul judicially, "that you can have cared very much whether I loved you or not. When you married me you knew that I was the promoter of the Charity League; I almost told you. I told you so much that with your knowledge

you must have been aware of the fact that I was heavily interested in the undertaking which you betrayed. You married me without certain proof of your husband's death, such was your haste to call yourself a princess. And now I find, on your own confession, that you have a clandestine understanding with a man who tried to murder me only a week ago. Is it not rather absurd to talk of caring?"

He stood looking down at her—cold and terrible in the white heat of his suppressed Northern anger.

The little clock on the mantelpiece, in a terrible hurry, ticked with all its might. Time was speeding. Every moment was against her. And she could think of nothing to say, simply because those things that she would have said to others would carry no weight with this man.

Etta was leaning forward in the luxurious chair, staring with haggard eyes into the fire. The flames leapt up and gleamed on her pale face, in her deep eyes.

"I suppose," she said, without looking at him, "that you will not believe me when I tell you that I hate the man. I knew nothing of what you refer to as happening last week—his attempt to murder you, I mean. You are a prince, and all-powerful in your own province. Can you not throw him into prison

and keep him there? Such things are done in Russia. He is more dangerous than you think. Please do it ---please——"

Paul looked at her with hard, unresponsive eyes. Lives depended on his answer.

"I did not come here to discuss Claude de Chauxville," he said, "but you, and our future."

Etta drew herself up as one under the lash, and waited with set teeth.

"I propose," he said, in a final voice which made it no proposition at all, "that you go home to England at once with—your cousin. This country is not safe for you. The house in London will be at your disposal. I shall make a suitable settlement on you, sufficient to live in accordance with your title and position. I must ask you to remember that the name you bear has hitherto been an unsullied one. We have been proud of our princesses—up to now. In case of any trouble reaching you from outside sources connected with this country I should like you to remember that you are under my protection and that of Steinmetz. Either of us will be glad at any time to consider any appeal for assistance that you may think fit to make. You will always be the Princess Howard-Alexis."

Etta gave a sudden laugh.

"Oh yes," she said, and her face was strangely red, "I shall still be the Princess Alexis."

"With sufficient money to keep up the position," he went on, with the cruel irony of a slow-spoken man.

A queer twisted smile passed across Etta's face—the smile of one who is in agony and will not shriek.

"There are certain stipulations which I must make in self-defence," went on Paul. "I must ask you to cease all communication of whatsoever nature with the Baron de Chauxville. I am not jealous of him —now. I do not know why."

He paused, as if wondering what the meaning of this might be. Etta knew it. The knowledge was part of her punishment.

"But," continued her husband, "I am not going to sacrifice the name my mother bore to the vanity of a French coxcomb. You will be kind enough to avoid all society where it is likely that you should meet him. If you disregard my desires in this matter I shall be compelled to take means to enforce them."

"What means?"

"I shall reduce your allowance."

Their eyes met, and perhaps that was the bitterest moment in Etta's life. Dead things are better put

out of sight at once. Etta felt that Paul's dead love would grin at her in every sovereign of the allowance which was to be hers. She would never get away from it, she could never shake off its memory.

"Am I to live alone?" asked Etta, suddenly finding her voice.

"That is as you like," answered Paul, perhaps purposely misunderstanding her. "You are at liberty to have any friends or companion you wish. Perhaps —your cousin."

"Maggie?"

"Yes," answered Paul. For the first time since he had entered the room his eyes were averted from Etta's face.

"She would not live with me," said the Princess curtly.

Paul seemed to be reflecting. When he next spoke it was in a kinder voice.

"You need not tell the circumstances which have given rise to this—arrangement."

Etta shrugged her shoulders.

"That," went on Paul, "rests entirely with yourself. You may be sure that I will tell no one. I am not likely to discuss it with anyone whomsoever."

Etta's stony eyes softened for a moment. She seemed to be alternating between hatred of this man

and love of him—a dangerous state for any woman. It is possible that if he had held his hand out to her she would have been at his feet in a wild incoherent passion of self-hatred and abasement. Such moments as these turn our lives and determine them. Paul knew nothing of the issue hanging on this moment, on the passing softness of her eyes. He knew nothing of the danger in which this woman stood, of the temptation with which she was wrestling. He went on in his blindness, went on being only just.

"If," he said, "you have any further questions to ask, I shall always be at your service. For the next few days I shall be busy. The peasants are in a state of discontent verging on rebellion. We cannot at present arrange for your journey to Tver, but as soon as it is possible I will tell you."

He looked at the clock, and made an imperceptible movement towards the door.

Etta glanced up sharply. She did not seem to be breathing.

"Is that all?" she asked in a dull voice.

There was a long silence, tense and throbbing, the great silence of the steppe.

"I think so," answered Paul at length. "I have tried to be just."

"Then justice is very cruel,"

"Not so cruel as the woman who for a few pounds sells the happiness of thousands of human beings. Steinmetz advised me to speak to you. He suggested the possibility of circumstances of which we are ignorant. He said that you might be able to explain."

Silence.

"Can you explain?"

Silence. Etta sat looking into the fire. The little clock hurried on. At length Etta drew a deep breath.

"You are the sort of man," she said, "who does not understand temptation. You are strong. The devil leaves the strong in peace. You have found virtue easy because you have never wanted money. Your position has always been assured. Your name alone is a password through the world. Your sort are always hard on women who—who—— What have I done after all?"

Some instinct bade her rise to her feet and stand before him, tall, beautiful, passionate, a woman in a thousand, a fit mate for such as he. Her beautiful hair in burnished glory round her face gleamed in the firelight. Her white fingers clenched, her arms thrown back, her breast panting beneath the lace, her proud face looking defiance into his—no one but a prince could have braved this princess.

"What have I done?" she cried a second time. "I have only fought for myself, and if I have won, so much the greater credit. I am your wife. I have done nothing the law can touch. Thousands of women moving in our circle are not half so good as I am. I swear before God I am———"

"Hush!" he said, with upraised hand. "I never doubted that."

"I will do anything you wish," she went on—and in her humility she was very dangerous. "I deceived you, I know. But I sold the Charity League before I knew that you—that you thought of me. When I married you I didn't love you. I admit that. But Paul, oh, Paul! if you were not so good you would understand."

Perhaps he did understand; for there was that in her eyes that made her meaning clear.

He was silent.

"You will not forgive me?"

For a moment she leant forward, peering into his face. He seemed to be reflecting.

"Yes," he said at length, "I forgive you. But if I cared for you forgiveness would be impossible."

He went slowly towards the door. Etta looked round the room with drawn eyes; their room—the

room he had fitted up for his bride with the lavishness of a great wealth and a great love.

He paused with his hand on the door.

"And," she said, with fiery cheeks, "does your forgiveness date from to-night?"

"Yes!"

He opened the door.

"Good-night!" he said, and went out.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STEPAN RETURNS.

At daybreak the next morning Karl Steinmetz was awakened by the familiar cry of the wolf beneath his window. He rose and dressed hastily. The eastern sky was faintly pink; a rosy twilight moved among the pines. He went downstairs and opened the little door at the back of the castle.

It was, of course, the Starosta, shivering and bleached in the chilly dawn.

"They have watched my cottage, Excellency, all night. It was only now that I could get away. There are two strange sleighs outside Domensky's hut. There are marks of many sleighs that have been and gone. Excellency, it is unsafe for anyone to venture outside the castle to-day. You must send to Tver for the soldiers."

"The Prince refuses to do that."

"But why, Excellency? We shall be killed."

"You do not know the effect of platoon firing on a closely packed mob, Starost. The Prince does," replied Steinmetz, with his grim smile.

They spoke together in hushed voices for half an hour while the daylight crept up the eastern sky. Then the Starosta stole away among the still larches, like the wolf whose cry he imitated so perfectly.

Steinmetz closed the door and went upstairs to his own room, his face grave and thoughtful, his tread heavy with the weight of anxiety.

The day passed as such days do. Etta was not the woman to plead a conventional headache and remain hidden. She came down to breakfast, and during that meal was boldly conversational.

"She has spirit," reflected Karl Steinmetz behind his quiet grey eyes. He admired her for it, and helped her. He threw back the ball of conversation with imperturbable good-humour.

They were completely shut in. No news from the outer world penetrated to the little party besieged within their own stone walls. Maggie, fearless and innocent, announced her intention of snow-shoeing, but was dissuaded therefrom by Steinmetz with covert warnings.

During the morning each was occupied in individual affairs. At luncheon-time they met again. Etta was now almost defiant. She was on her mettle. She was so near to loving Paul that a hatred of him

welled up within her breast whenever he repelled her advances with uncompromising reticence.

They did not know—perhaps she hardly knew herself—that the opening of the side-door depended upon her humour.

In the afternoon Etta and Maggie sat, as was their wont, in the morning-room looking out over the cliff. Of late their intercourse had been slightly strained. They had never had much in common, although circumstances had thrown their lives together.

It is one of the ills to which women are heir that they have frequently to pass their whole lives in the society of persons with whom they have no real sympathy. Both these women were conscious of the little rift within the lute, but such rifts are better treated with silence. That which comes to interfere with a woman's friendship will not often bear discussion.

At dusk Steinmetz went out. He had an appointment with the Starosta.

Paul was sitting in his own room, making a pretence of work, about five o'clock, when Steinmetz came hurriedly to him.

"A new development," he said shortly. "Come to my room."

Paul rose and followed him through the double doorway built in the thickness of the wall.

Steinmetz's large room was lighted only by a lamp standing on the table. All the light was thrown on the desk by a large green shade, leaving the rest of the room in a semi-darkness.

At the far end of the room a man was standing in an expectant attitude. There was something furtive about this intruder, and at the same time familiar to Paul, who peered at him through the gloom.

Then the man came hurriedly forward.

"Ah, Pavlo, Pavlo!" he said in a deep, hollow voice. "I could not expect you to know me."

He threw his arms around him, and embraced him after the simple manner of Russia. Then he held him at arms' length.

"Stepán!" said Paul. "No, I did not know you."

Stepán Lanovitch was still holding him at arms' length, examining him with the large faint blue eyes which so often go with an exaggerated philanthropy.

"Old," he muttered, "old. Ah, my poor Pavlo. I heard in Kiew—you know how we outlaws hear such things—that you were in trouble, so I came to you."

Steinmetz in the background raised his patient eyebrows.

"There are two men in the world," went on the voluble Lanovitch, "who can manage the moujiks of Tver—you and I; so I came. I will help you, Pavlo; I will stand by you. Together we can assuredly quell this revolt."

Paul nodded, and allowed himself to be embraced a second time. He had long known Stepán Lanovitch of Thors as one of the many who go about the world doing good with their eyes shut. For the moment he had absolutely no use for this well-meaning blunderer.

"I am afraid," he said, "that it has got beyond control. We cannot stamp it out now except by force, and I would rather not do that. Our only hope is that it may burn itself out. The talkers must get hoarse in time."

Lanovitch shook his head.

"They have been talking since the days of Ananias," he said, "and they are not hoarse yet. I fear, Pavlo, there will never be peace in the world until the talkers are hoarse."

"How did you get here?" asked Paul.

"I brought a pack on my back and sold cotton. I made myself known to the Starosta, and he communicated with good Karl here."

"Did you learn anything in the village?" asked Paul.

"No; they suspected me. They would not talk. But I understand them, Pavlo, these poor simple fools. A pebble in the stream would turn the current of their convictions. Tell them who is the Moscow Doctor. It is your only chance."

Steinmetz grunted acquiescence and walked wearily to the window. This was only an old and futile argument of his own.

"And make it impossible for me to live another day among them," said Paul. "Do you think St. Petersburg would countenance a prince who works among his moujiks."

Stepán Lanovitch's pale blue eyes looked troubled. Steinmetz shrugged his shoulders.

"They have brought it on themselves," he said.

"As much as a lamb brings the knife upon itself by growing up," replied Paul.

Lanovitch shook his white head with a tolerant little smile. He loved these poor helpless peasants with a love as large as and a thousand times less practical than Paul's.

In the meantime Paul was thinking. It was this man's habit in life and in thought to walk straight past the side issues.

"It is like you, Stepán," he said at length, "to come to us at this time. We feel it, and we recognise

the generosity of it, for Steinmetz and I know the danger you are running in coming back to this country. But we cannot let you do it—— No, do not protest. It is quite out of the question. We might quell the revolt; no doubt we should—the two of us together. But what would happen afterwards? You would be sent back to Siberia, and I should probably follow you for harbouring an escaped convict."

The face of the impulsive philanthropist dropped pathetically. He had come to his friend's assistance on the spur of the moment. He was destined, as some men are, to plunge about the world seeking to do good. And it has been decreed that good must be done by stealth and after deliberation only. He who does good on the spur of the moment usually sows a seed of dissension in the trench of time.

"Also," went on Paul, with a deliberate grasp of the situation—"also, you have other calls upon your energy. You have other work to do."

Lanovitch's broad face lightened up; his benevolent brow beamed. His capacity for work had brought him to the shoemaker's last in Tomsk. It is a vice that grows with indulgence.

"It has pleased the Authorities," went on Paul, who was shy of religious turns of phrase, "to give

us all our own troubles. Mine—such as they are, Stepán—must be managed by myself. Yours can be faced by no one but you. You have come at the right moment. You do not quite realise what your coming means to Catrina."

"Catrina! Ah!"

The weak blue eyes looked into the strong face and read nothing there.

"I doubt," said Paul, "whether it is right for you to continue sacrificing Catrina for the sake of the little good that you are able to do. You are hampered in your good work to such an extent that the result is very small, while the pain you give is very great."

"But is that so, Pavlo? Is my child unhappy?"

"I fear so," replied Paul gravely. "She has not much in common with her mother, you understand."

"Ah, yes."

"It is you to whom she is attached. Sometimes it is so with children and parents. One cannot tell why."

Steinmetz looked as if he could supply information upon the subject; but he remained silent, standing, as it were, in an acquiescent attitude.

"You have fought your fight," said Paul. "A good fight too. You have struck your blow for the

country. You have sown your seed, but the harvest is not yet. Now it is time to think of your own safety, of the happiness of your own child."

Stepán Lanovitch turned away and sat heavily down. He leant his two arms on the table and his chin upon his clenched hands.

"Why not leave the country now; at all events for a few years?" went on Paul; and when a man who is accustomed to command stoops to persuade, it is strong persuasion that he wields. "You can take Catrina with you. You will be assuring her happiness, which, at all events, is something tangible —a present harvest! I will drive over to Thors now and bring her back. You can leave to-night and go to America."

Stepán Lanovitch raised his head and looked hard into Paul's face.

"You wish it?"

"I think," answered Paul steadily, "that it is for Catrina's happiness."

Then Lanovitch rose up and took Paul's hand in his work-stained grip.

"Go, my son. It will be a great happiness to me. I will wait here," he said.

Paul went straight to the door. Steinmetz followed him out into the passage and took him by the arm,

"You cannot do it," he said.

"Yes, I can," replied Paul. "I can find my way through the forest. No one will venture to follow me there in the dark."

Steinmetz hesitated, shrugged his shoulders, and went back into the room.

The ladies at Thors were dressed for dinner, were, indeed, awaiting the announcement of that meal, when Paul broke in upon their solitude. He did not pause to lay aside his furs, but went into the long low room, withdrawing his seal gloves painfully, for it was freezing as it only can freeze in March.

The Countess assailed him with many questions, more or less sensible, which he endured patiently until the servant had left the room. Catrina, with flushed cheeks, stood looking at him, but said nothing.

Paul withdrew his gloves and submitted to the Countess's futile tugs at his fur coat. Then Catrina spoke.

"The Comte de Chauxville has left us," she said, without knowing exactly why.

For the moment Paul had forgotten Claude de Chauxville's existence.

"I have news for you," he said; and he gently

pushed the chattering Countess aside. "Stepán Lanovitch is at Osterno. He arrived to-night."

"Ah, they have set him free, poor man! Does he wear chains on his ankles—is his hair long? My poor Stepán! Ah, but what a stupid man!"

The Countess collapsed into a soft chair. She chose a soft one obviously. It has to be recorded here that she did not receive the news with unmitigated joy.

"When he was in Siberia," she gasped, "one knew at all events where he was; and now, *mon Dieu!* what an anxiety!"

"I have come over to see whether you will join him to-night and go with him to America," said Paul, looking at her.

"To—America—to-night! My dear Paul, are you mad? One cannot do such things as that. America! that is across the sea."

"Yes," answered Paul.

"And I am such a bad sailor. Now, if it had been Paris——"

"But it cannot be," interrupted Paul. "Will you join your father to-night?" he added, turning to Catrina.

The girl was looking at him with something in her eyes that he did not care to meet.

"And go to America?" she asked in a lifeless voice.

Paul nodded.

Catrina turned suddenly away from him and walked to the fire, where she stood with her back towards him—a small uncouth figure in black and green, the lamplight gleaming on her wonderful hair. She turned suddenly again, and, coming back, stood looking into his face.

"I will go," she said. "You think it best?"

"Yes," he answered; "*I* think it best."

She drew a sharp breath, and was about to speak, when the Countess interrupted her.

"What!" she cried. "You are going away to-night like this, without any luggage? And pray what is to become of me?"

"You can join them in America," said Paul in his quietest tone. "Or you can live in Paris, at last."

CHAPTER XIX.

DUTY.

It was not now a very cold night. There were fleecy clouds thrown like puffs of smoke against the western sky. The moon on the wane—a small crescent lying on its back—was lowering towards the horizon. The thermometer had risen since sunset, as it often does in March. There was a suggestion of spring in the air. It seemed that at last the long winter was drawing to a close, that the iron grip of frost was relaxing.

Paul went out and inspected the harness by the light of a stable lantern held in the mittened hand of a yemschick. He had reasons of his own for absenting himself while Catrina bade her mother farewell. He was rather afraid of these women.

The harness inspected, he began reckoning how many hours of moonlight might still be vouchsafed to him. The stableman, seeing the direction of his gaze, began to talk of the weather and the possibilities of snow in the near future. They conversed in low voices together.

Presently the door opened and Catrina came quickly out, followed by a servant carrying a small hand-bag.

Paul could not see Catrina's face. She was veiled, and furred to the eyelids. Without a word the girl took her seat in the sleigh, and the servant prepared the bearskin rugs. Paul gathered up the reins and took his place beside her. A few moments were required to draw up the rugs and fasten them with straps; then Paul gave the word and the horses leapt forward.

As they sped down the avenue Catrina turned and looked her last on Thors.

Before long Paul wheeled into the trackless forest. He had come very carefully, steering chiefly by the moon and stars, with occasional assistance from a bend of the winding river. At times he had taken to the ice, following the course of the stream for a few miles. No snow had fallen; it would be easy to return on his own track. Through this part of the forest no road was cut.

For nearly half an hour they drove in silence. Only the whistle of the iron-bound runners on the powdery snow, the creak of the warming leather on the horses, the regular breathing of the team, broke the stillness of the forest. Paul hoped against hope

that Catrina was asleep. She sat by his side, her arm touching his sleeve, her weight thrown against him at such times as the sleigh bumped over a fallen tree or some inequality of the ground.

He could not help wondering what thoughts there were behind her silence. Steinmetz's good-natured banter had come back to his memory during the last few days in a new light.

"Paul," said the woman at his side quite suddenly, breaking the silence of the great forest where they had grown to life and sorrow almost side by side.

"Yes."

"I want to know how this all came about. It is not my father's doing. There is something quick, and practical, and wise, which suggests you and Herr Steinmetz. I suspect that you have done this—you and he—for our happiness."

"No," answered Paul; "it was mere accident. Your father heard of our trouble in Kiew. You know him—always impulsive and reckless. He never thinks of the danger. He came to help us."

Catrina smiled wanly.

"But it *is* for our happiness, is it not, Paul? You know that it is—that is why you have done it. I have not had time yet to realise what I am doing,

and all that is going to happen. But if it is your doing, I think I shall be content to abide by the result."

"It is not my doing," replied Paul, who did not like her wistful tone. "It is the outcome of circumstances. Circumstances have been ruling us all lately. We seem to have no time to consider, but only to do that which seems best for the moment."

"And it is best that I should go to America with my father?" Her voice was composed and quiet. In the dim light he could not see her white lips; indeed, he never looked.

"It seems so to me, undoubtedly," he said. "In doing this, so far as we can see at present, it seems certain that you are saving your father from Siberia. You know what he is; he never thinks of his own safety. He ought never to have come here to-night. If he remains in Russia it is an absolute certainty that he will sooner or later be re-arrested. He is one of those good people who require saving from themselves."

Catrina nodded. At times Duty is the kedge-anchor of Happiness. The girl was dimly aware that she was holding to this. She was simple and unsophisticated enough to consider Paul's opinion infallible. At the great cross-roads of life we are

apt to ask the way of anybody who happens to be near. Catrina might perhaps have made a worse choice of counsel, for Paul was honest.

"As you put it," she said, "it is clearly my duty. There is a sort of consolation in that, however painful it may be at the time. I suppose it is consolatory to look back and think that at all events one did one's duty."

"I don't know," answered Paul simply; "I suppose so."

Looking back was not included in his method of life, which was rather characterised by a large faith and a forward pressure. Whenever there was question of considering life as an abstract he drew within his shell with a manlike shyness. He had no generalities ready for each emergency.

"Would father have gone alone?" she asked, with a very human thrill of hope in her voice.

"No," answered Paul steadily, "I think not. But you can ask him."

They had never been so distant as they were at this moment—so cold, such mere acquaintances. And they had played together in one nursery.

"Of course, if that is the case," said the girl, "my duty is quite clear."

"It required some persuasion to make him consent to go, even with you," said Paul.

A rough piece of going—for there was no road—debarred further conversation at this time. The sleigh rolled and bumped over one fallen tree after another. Paul, with his feet stretched out, wedged firmly into the sleigh, encouraged the tired horses with rein and voice. Catrina was compelled to steady herself with both hands on the bar of the apron; for the apron of a Russian sleigh is a heavy piece of leather stretched on a wooden bar.

"Then you think my duty is quite clear," repeated the girl at length.

Paul did not answer at once.

"I am sure of it," he said.

And there the question ended. Catrina Lanovitch, who had never been ruled by those about her, shaped her whole life unquestioningly upon an opinion.

They did not speak for some time, and then it was the girl who broke the silence.

"I have a confession to make and a favour to ask," she said bluntly.

Paul's attitude denoted attention, but he said nothing.

"It is about the Baron de Chauxville," she said.

"Ah!"

"I am a coward," she went on. "I did not know it before. It is rather humiliating. I have been trying for some weeks to tell you something, but I am horribly afraid of it. I am afraid you will despise me. I have been a fool—worse perhaps. I never knew that Claude de Chauxville was the sort of person he is. I allowed him to find out things about me which he never should have known—my own private affairs, I mean. Then I became frightened and he tried to make use of me. I think he makes use of everybody. *You* know what he is."

"Yes," answered Paul, "I know."

"He hates you," she went on. "I do not want to make mischief, but I suppose he wanted to marry the Princess. His vanity was wounded because she preferred you, and he wanted to be avenged upon you. Wounds to the vanity never heal. I do not know how he did it, Paul, but he made me help him in his schemes. I could have prevented you from going to the bear hunt, for I suspected him then. I could have prevented my mother from inviting him to Thors. I could have put a thousand difficulties in his way, but I did not. I helped him. I told him about the people and who were the worst

—who had been influenced by the Nihilists and who would not work. I allowed him to stay on here and carry out his plan. All this trouble among the peasants is his handiwork. He has organised a regular rising against you. He is horribly clever. He left us yesterday, but I am convinced that he is in the neighbourhood still."

She stopped and reflected. There was something wanting in the story which she could not supply. It was a motive. A half-confession is almost an impossibility. When we speak of ourselves it must be all or nothing—preferably, nothing.

"I do not know why I did it," she said. "It was a sort of period I went through. I cannot explain."

He did not ask her to do so. They were singularly like brother and sister in their mental attitude. They had driven through twenty miles of forest which belonged to one or other of them. Each was touched by the intangible, inexplicable dignity that belongs to the possession of great lands —to the inheritance of a great name.

"That is the confession," she said.

He gave a little laugh.

"If none of us had worse than that upon our consciences," he answered, "there would be little

harm in the world. De Chauxville's schemes have only hurried on a crisis which was foreordained. The progress of humanity cannot be stayed. They have tried to stay it in this country. They will go on trying until the crash comes. What is the favour you have to ask?"

"You must leave Osterno," she urged earnestly; "it is unsafe to delay even a few hours. Monsieur de Chauxville said there would be no danger. I believed him then, but I do not now. Besides, I know the peasants. They are hard to rouse, but once excited they are uncontrollable. They are afraid of nothing. You must get away to-night."

Paul made no answer.

She turned slowly in her seat and looked into his face by the light of the waning moon.

"Do you mean that you will not go?"

He met her glance with his grave slow smile.

"There is no question of going," he answered. "You must know that."

She did not attempt to persuade. Perhaps there was something in his voice which she as a Russian understood—a ring of that which we call pig-headedness in others.

"It must be splendid to be a man," she said suddenly in a ringing voice. "One feeling in me

made me ask you the favour, while another was a sense of gladness at your certain refusal. I wish I were a man. I envy you. You do not know how I envy you, Paul."

Paul gave a quiet laugh—such a laugh as one hears in the trenches after the low hum of a passing ball.

"If it is danger you want, you will have more than I in the next week," he answered. "Steinmetz and I knew that you were the only woman in Russia who could get your father safely out of the country. That is why I came for you."

The girl did not answer at once. They were driving on the road again now, and the sleigh was running smoothly.

"I suppose," she said reflectively at length, "that the secret of the enormous influence you exercise over all who come in contact with you is that you drag the best out of everyone—the best that is in them."

Paul did not answer.

"What is that light?" she asked suddenly, laying her hand on the thick fur of his sleeve. She was not nervous, but very watchful. "There—straight in front."

"It is the sleigh," replied Paul, "with your

father and Steinmetz. I arranged that they should meet us at the cross-roads. You must be at the Volga before daylight. Send the horses on to Tver. I have given you Minna and the Warrior; they can do the journey with one hour's rest, but you must drive them."

Catrina had swayed forward against the bar of the apron in a strange way, for the road was quite smooth. She placed her gloved hands on the bar and held herself upright with a peculiar effort.

"What?" said Paul. For she had made an inarticulate sound.

"Nothing," she answered. Then, after a pause, "I did not know that we were to go so soon. That was all."

CHAPTER XX.

THE STORM BURSTS.

THE large drawing-room was brilliantly lighted. Another weary day had dragged to its close. It was the Tuesday evening—the last Tuesday in March five years ago. The Starosta had not been near the castle all day. Steinmetz and Paul had never lost sight of the ladies since breakfast-time. They had not ventured out of doors. There was in the atmosphere a sense of foreboding—the stillness of a crisis. Etta had been defiant and silent—a dangerous humour—all day. Maggie had watched Paul's face with steadfast quiet eyes full of courage, for she knew now that there was danger.

The conversation at breakfast and luncheon had been maintained by Steinmetz—always collected and a little humorous. It was now dinner-time. The whole castle was brilliantly lighted as if for a great assembly of guests. During the last week a fuller state—a greater ceremony—had been observed by Paul's orders, and Steinmetz had thought more than

once of that historical event which appealed most to his admiration—the Indian mutiny.

Maggie was in the drawing-room alone. She was leaning one hand and arm on the mantelpiece, looking thoughtfully into the fire. The rustle of silk made her turn her head. It was Etta, beautifully dressed, with a white face and eyes dull with suspense.

"I think it is warmer to-night," said Maggie, urged by a sudden necessity of speech, hampered by a sudden chill at the heart.

"Yes," answered Etta. And she shivered.

For a moment there was a little silence and Etta looked at the clock. It was ten minutes to seven.

A high wind was blowing, the first of the equinoctial gales heralding the Spring. The sound of the wind in the great chimney was like the moaning of high rigging at sea.

The door opened and Steinmetz came in. Etta's face hardened, her lips closed with a snap. Steinmetz looked at her and at Maggie. For once he seemed to have no pleasantry ready for use. He walked towards a table where some books and newspapers lay in pleasant profusion. He was standing there when Paul came into the room. The Prince

glanced at Maggie. He saw where his wife stood, but he did not look at her.

Steinmetz was writing something on half a sheet of notepaper, in pencil. He pushed it across the table towards Paul, who drew it nearer to him.

"Are you armed?" were the written words.

Paul crushed the paper in the hollow of his hand and threw it into the fire, where it burnt away. He also glanced at the clock. It was five minutes to seven.

Suddenly the door was thrown open and a man-servant rushed in—pale, confused, terror-stricken. He was a giant footman in the gorgeous livery of the Alexis.

"Excellency," he stammered in Russian, "the castle is surrounded—they will kill us—they will burn us out——" He stopped abashed before Paul's pointing finger and stony face.

"Leave the room!" said Paul. "You forget yourself."

Through the open doorway to which Paul pointed peered the ashen faces of other servants huddled together like sheep.

"Leave the room!" repeated Paul, and the man obeyed him, walking to the door unsteadily with quivering chin. On the threshold he paused. Paul

stood pointing to the door. He had a poise of the head—some sudden awakening of the blood that had coursed in the veins of hereditary potentates. Maggie looked at him; she had never known him like this. She had known the man, she had never encountered the Prince.

The big clock over the castle boomed out the hour, and at the same instant there arose a roar like the voice of the surf on a Malabar shore. There was a crashing of glass almost in the room itself. Already Steinmetz was drawing the curtains closer over the windows in order to prevent the light from filtering through the interstices of the closed shutters.

"Only stones," he said to Paul, with his grim smile; "it might have been bullets."

As if in corroboration of his suggestion the sharp ring of more than one firearm rang out above the dull roar of many voices.

Steinmetz crossed the room to where Etta was standing white-lipped by the fire. Her clenched hand was gripping Maggie's wrist. She was half hidden behind her cousin. Maggie was looking at Paul. Etta was obviously conscious of Steinmetz's gaze and approach.

"I asked you before to tell me all you knew," he said. "You refused. Will you do it now?"

Etta met his glance for a moment, shrugged her shoulders, and turned her back on him. Paul was standing in the open doorway, with his back turned towards them—alone. The palace had never looked so vast as it did at that moment—brilliantly lighted, gorgeous, empty.

Through the hail of blows on the stout doors, the rattle of stones at the windows, the Prince could hear yells of execration and the wild laughter that is bred of destruction. He turned and entered the room. His face was grey and terrible.

"They have no chance," he said, "of effecting an entrance by force, the lower windows are barred. They have no ladders, Steinmetz and I have seen to that. We have been expecting this for some days."

He turned towards Steinmetz as if seeking confirmation. The din was increasing. When the German spoke he had to shout.

"We can beat them back if we like. We can shoot them down from the windows. But"—he paused, shrugged his shoulders and laughed—"what will you? this Prince will not shoot his father's serfs."

"We must leave you," went on Paul. "We must beware of treachery. Whatever happens, we shall

not leave the house. If the worst comes, we make our last stand in this room. Whatever happens, stay here till we come."

He left the room, followed by Steinmetz. There were only three doors in the impregnable stone walls; the great entrance, a side door for use in times of deep snow, and the small concealed entrance by which the Starosta was in the habit of reaching his masters.

For a moment the two men stood at the head of the stairs listening to the wild commotion. They were turning to descend the state stairs when a piercing shriek, immediately drowned by a yell of triumph, broke the silence of the interior of the castle. There was a momentary stillness followed by another shriek.

"They are in!" said Steinmetz. "The side door."

And the two men looked at each other with wide eyes full of knowledge.

As they ran to the foot of the broad staircase the tramp of scuffling feet, the roar of angry voices, came through the passages from the back of curtained doorways. The servants' quarters seemed to be a pandemonium. The sounds approached.

"Half-way up!" said Paul, and they ran half-

way up the broad staircase side by side. There they stood and waited.

In a moment the baize doors were burst open and a scuffling mass of men and women poured into the hall—a very sewer of humanity.

A howl of rage signalised their recognition of the Prince.

"They are mad!" said Steinmetz, as the crowd surged forward towards the stairs with waving arms and the dull gleam of steel; with wild faces turned upward, wild mouths bellowing hatred and murder.

"It is a chance—it may stop them!" said Steinmetz.

His arm was outstretched steadily. A loud report, a little puff of smoke shooting upward to the gilded ceiling, and for one brief moment the crowd stood still, watching one of their ringleaders who was turning and twisting on his side half a dozen steps from the bottom.

The man writhed in silence with his hand to his breast, and the crowd stood aghast. He held up his hand and gazed at it with a queer stupefaction. The blood dripped from his fingers. Then his chin went up as if someone was gripping the back of his neck. He turned over slowly and rolled to the bottom of the stairs.

Then Paul raised his voice.

"Listen to me," he said.

But he got no farther, for someone shot at him from the background, over the frantic heads of the others, and missed him. The bullet lodged in the wall at the head of the stairs in the jamb of the gorgeous doorway. It is there to-day.

There was a yell of hatred and an ugly charge towards the stairs; but the sight of two revolvers held them there—motionless for a few moments. Those in front pushed back, while the shouters in the safe background urged them forward by word and gesture.

Two men holding a hundred in check. But one of the two was a Prince, which makes all the difference, and will continue to make that difference, despite halfpenny journalism, until the end of the world.

"What do you want?" cried Paul.

"Oh, I will wait," he shouted in the next pause. "There is plenty of time—when you are tired of shouting."

Several of them proceeded to tell him what they wanted. An old story, too stale for repetition here. Paul recognised in the din of many voices the tinkling arguments of the professional agitator all the world

over, the cry of "Equality—Equality!" when men are obviously created unequal.

"Look out!" said Paul; "I believe they are going to make a rush."

All the while the foremost men were edging towards the stairs, while the densely-packed throng at the back were struggling among themselves. In the passages behind, some were yelling and screaming with a wild intonation which Steinmetz recognised. He had been through the Commune.

"Those fellows at the back have been killing someone," he said; "I can tell by their voices. They are drunk with the sight of blood."

Some new orator gained the ears of the rabble at this moment, and the ill-kempt heads swayed from side to side.

"It is useless," he cried, "telling him what you want. He will not give it you. Go and take it. Go and take it, little fathers; that is the only way."

Steinmetz raised his hand and peered down into the crowd, looking for the man of eloquence, and the voice was hushed.

At this moment, however, the yelling increased, and through the doorway leading to the servants' quarters came a stream of men—bloodstained, ragged,

torn. They were waving arms and implements above their heads.

"Down with the aristocrats! kill them—kill them!" they were shrieking.

A little volley of firearms further excited them. But vodka is not a good thing to shoot upon, and Paul stood untouched, waiting, as he had said, until they were tired of shouting.

"Now," yelled Steinmetz to him in English, "we must go. We can make a stand at the head of the stairs, then the doorway, then——"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Then—the end," he added as they moved up the stairs step by step, backwards.

"My very good friend," he went on, "at the door we must begin to shoot them down. It is our only chance. It is, moreover, our duty towards the ladies."

"There is one alternative," answered Paul.

"The Moscow Doctor."

"Yes."

"They may turn," said Paul; "they are just in that humour."

The new-comers were the most dangerous. They were forcing their way to the front. There was no doubt that as soon as they could penetrate the

densely-packed mob they would charge up the stairs, even in the face of a heavy fire. The reek of vodka was borne up in the heated atmosphere, mingled with the nauseating odour of filthy clothing.

"Go," said Steinmetz, "and put on your doctor's clothes. I can keep them back for a few minutes."

There was no time to be lost. Paul slipped away, leaving Steinmetz alone at the summit of the state stairway, standing grimly, revolver in hand.

In the drawing-room Paul found Maggie, alone.

"Where is Etta?" he asked.

"She left the room some time ago."

"But I told her to stay," said Paul.

To this Maggie made no answer. She was looking at him with an anxious scrutiny.

"Did they shoot at you?" she asked.

"Yes; but not straight," he answered with a little laugh as he hurried on.

In a few moments he was back in the drawing-room, a different man, in the rough, stained clothes of the Moscow Doctor. The din on the stairs was louder. Steinmetz was almost in the doorway. He was shooting economically, picking his men.

With an effort Paul dragged one or two heavy pieces of furniture across the room, in the form of

a rough barricade. He pointed to the hearthrug where Maggie was to stand.

"Ready!" he shouted to Steinmetz. "Come."

The German ran in, and Paul closed the barricade.

The rabble poured in at the open door, screaming and shouting. Blood-stained, ragged, wild with the madness of murder, they crowded to the barricade. There they stopped, gazing stupidly at Paul.

"The Moscow Doctor!—the Moscow Doctor!" passed from lip to lip. It was the women who shouted it the loudest. Like the wind through a forest it swept out of the room and down the stairs. Those crowding up pushed on and uttered the words as they came. The room was packed.

"Yes!" shouted Steinmetz at the top of his great voice, "and the Prince!"

He knew the note to strike, and struck with a sure hand. The barricade was torn aside, and the people swept forward falling on their knees, grovelling at Paul's feet kissing the hem of his garment, seizing his hands in theirs.

It was a mighty harvest. That which is sown in the people's heart bears a thousandfold at last.

"Get them out of the place—open the big doors,"

said Paul to Steinmetz. He stood cold and grave among them.

Some of them were already sneaking towards the door—the ringleaders, the talkers from the towns—mindful of their own necks in this change of feeling.

Steinmetz hustled them out, bidding them take their dead with them. Some of the servants re-appeared, peeping whitefaced behind curtains. When the last villager had crossed the threshold, these ran forward to close and bar the great doors.

"No," said Paul, from the head of the stairs, "leave them open."

So the great doors stood defiantly open. The lights of the state staircase flared out over the village as the peasants crept crestfallen to their cottages. They glanced up shamefacedly, but they had no word to say.

Steinmetz, in the drawing-room, looked at Paul with his resigned semi-humorous shrug of the shoulders.

"Touch and go, *mein lieber!*" he said.

"Yes; an end of Russia for us," answered the Prince.

He moved towards the door leading through to the old castle.

"I am going to look for Etta," he said.

"And I," said Steinmetz, going to the other entrance, "am going to see who opened the side door."

CHAPTER XXI.

BEHIND THE VEIL.

"WILL you come with me?" said Paul to Maggie. "I will send the servants to put this room to rights."

Maggie followed him out of the room, and together they went through the passages, calling Etta and looking for her. There was an air of gloom and chilliness in the rooms of the old castle. The outline of the great stones, dimly discernible through the wall-paper, was singularly suggestive of a fortress thinly disguised.

"I suppose," said Paul, "that Etta lost her nerve."

"Yes," answered Maggie doubtfully. "I think it was that."

Paul went on. He carried a lamp in one hand.

"We shall probably find her in one of these rooms," he said. "It is so easy to lose oneself among the passages and staircases."

They passed on through the great smoking-room, with its hunting trophies. The lynx, with its face

of Claude de Chauxville, grinned at them darkly from its pedestal.

Halfway down the stairs leading to the side door they met Steinmetz coming hastily up. His face was white and drawn with horror.

"You must not go down here," he said, in a husky voice, barring the passage with his arm.

"Why not?"

"Go up again!" said Steinmetz breathlessly. "You must not go down here."

Paul laid his hand on the broad arm stretched across the stairway. For a moment it almost appeared to be a physical struggle, then Steinmetz stepped aside.

"I beg of you," he said, "not to go down."

And Paul went on, followed by Steinmetz, and behind them, Maggie. At the foot of the stairs a broader passage led to the side door, and from this other passages opened into the servants' quarters, and communicated through the kitchens with the modern building.

It was evident that the door leading to the grassy slope at the back of the castle was open, for a cold wind blew up the stairs and made the lamps flicker.

At the end of the passage Paul stopped.

Steinmetz was a little behind him, holding Maggie back.

The two lamps lighted up the passage and showed the white form of the Princess Alexis lying huddled up against the wall. The face was hidden, but there was no mistaking the beautiful dress and hair. It could only be Etta. Paul stooped down and looked at her, but he did not touch her. He went a few paces forward and closed the door. Beyond Etta a black form lay across the passage, all trodden under foot and dishevelled. Paul held the lamp down, and through the mud and blood Claude de Chauxville's clear-cut features were outlined.

Death is always unmistakable, though it be shown by nothing more than a heap of muddy clothes.

Claude de Chauxville was lying across the passage. He had been trodden underfoot by the stream of maddened peasants whom Steinmetz had checked at the foot of the stairs by shooting their ringleader.

De Chauxville's scalp was torn away by a blow probably given with a spade or some blunt instrument. His hand still held a revolver. The other arm was stretched out towards Etta, who lay across his feet, crouching against the wall. Death had found and left her in an attitude of fear, shielding her bowed head from a blow with her upraised hands. Her

loosened hair fell in a long wave of gold down to the bloodstained hand outstretched towards her. She was kneeling in De Chauxville's blood, which stained the stone floor of the passage.

Paul leant forward and laid his fingers on her bare arm just below a bracelet which gleamed in the lamp-light. She was quite dead. He held a lamp close to her. There was no mark or scratch upon her arm or shoulder. The blow which had torn her hair down had killed her without any disfigurement. The silken skirt of her dress, which lay across the passage, was trampled and stained by the tread of a hundred muddy feet.

Then Paul went to Claude de Chauxville. He stooped down and slipped his skilled fingers inside the torn and mud-stained clothing. Here also was death.

Paul stood upright and looked at them as they lay, silent, motionless, with their tale untold. Maggie and Steinmetz stood watching him. He went to the door, which was of solid oak four inches thick, and examined the fastenings. There had been no damage done to bolt, or lock, or hinge. The door had been opened from the inside. He looked slowly round, measuring the distances.

"What is the meaning of it?" he said, at length,

to Steinmetz, in a dull voice. Maggie winced at the sound of it.

Steinmetz did not answer at once, but hesitated —after the manner of a man weighing words which will never be forgotten by their hearers.

"It seems to me quite clear," he said, with a slow, wise charity, the best of its kind, "that De Chauxville died in trying to save her—the rest must be only guesswork."

Maggie had come forward and was standing beside him.

"And in guessing let us be charitable—is it not so?" he said, turning to her, with a twist of his lips.

"I suppose," he went on, after a little pause, "that Claude de Chauxville has been at the bottom of all our trouble. All his life he has been one of the stormy petrels of diplomacy. Wherever he has gone trouble has followed later. By some means he obtained sufficient mastery over the Princess to compel her to obey his orders. The means he employed were threats. He had it in his power to make mischief, and in such affairs a woman is so helpless that we may well forgive that which she may do in a moment of panic. I imagine that he frightened the poor lady into obedience to his com-

mand that she should open this door. Before dinner, when we were all in the drawing-room, I noted a little mark of dust on the white silk skirt of her dress. At the time I thought only that her maid had been careless. Perhaps you noticed it, Mademoiselle? Ladies note such things."

He turned to Maggie, who nodded her head.

"That," he went on, "was the dust of these old passages. She had been down here. She had opened this door."

He spread out his hand in deprecation. In his quaint Germanic way he held one hand out over the two motionless forms in mute prayer that they might be forgiven.

"We all have our faults," he said; "who are we to judge each other? If we understood all, we might pardon. The two strongest human motives are ambition and fear. She was ruled by both. I myself have seen her under the influence of sudden panic. I have noted the working of her great ambition. She was probably deceived at every turn by that man, who was a scoundrel. He is dead, and death is understood to wipe out all debts. If I were a better man than I am, I might speak well of him. But—*ach Gott!* that man was a scoundrel. I think the good God will judge between them and forgive that

poor woman. She must have repented of her action when she heard the clatter of the rioters all round the castle. I am sure she did that. I am sure she came down here to shut the door, and found Claude de Chauxville here. They were probably talking together when the poor mad fools who killed them came round to this side of the castle and found them. They recognised her as the Princess. They probably mistook him for the Prince. It is what men call a series of coincidences. I wonder what God calls it."

He broke off, and stooping down he drew the lappet of the Frenchman's cloak gently over the marred face.

"And let us remember," he said, "that he tried to save her. Some lives are so. At the very end a little reparation is made. In life he was her evil genius. When he died they trampled him under-foot in order to reach her. Mademoiselle, will you come?"

He took Maggie by the arm and led her gently away. She was shaking all over, but his hand was steady.

He led her up the narrow stairs to her own room. In the little boudoir the fire was burning brightly;

the lamps were lighted, just as the maid had left them at the first alarm.

Maggie sat down, and quite suddenly burst into tears.

Steinmetz did not leave her. He stood beside her gently stroking her shoulder with his stout fingers. He said nothing, but the grey moustache only half concealed his lips, which were full of tenderness and sympathy.

Maggie was the first to speak.

"I am all right now," she said. "Please do not wait any longer. Poor Etta!"

Steinmetz moved away towards the door.

"Yes," he said; "poor Etta. It is often those who get on in the world who most need the world's pity."

At the door he stopped.

"To-morrow," he said, "I will take you home to England. Is that agreeable to you, Mademoiselle?"

She smiled at him sadly through her tears.

"Yes, I should like that," she said. "This country is horrible. You are very kind to me."

Steinmetz went downstairs and found Paul at the door talking to a young officer, who slowly dismounted and lounged into the hall, conscious of his

brilliant uniform—of his own physical capacity to show off any uniform to full advantage.

He was a lieutenant in a Cossack regiment, and as he bowed to Steinmetz, whom Paul introduced, he swung off his high astrakhan cap with a flourish, showing a fair boyish face.

"Yes," he continued to Paul in English; "the general sent me over with a sotnia of men, and pretty hungry you will find them. We have covered the whole distance since daybreak. A report reached the old gentleman that the whole countryside was about to rise against you."

"Who spread the report?" asked Steinmetz.

"I believe it originated down at the wharfs. It has been traced to an old man and his daughter—a sort of pedlar, I think, who took a passage down the river—but where they heard the rumour I don't know."

Paul and Steinmetz carefully avoided looking at each other. They knew that Catrina and Stepán Lanovitch had sent back assistance.

"Of course," said Paul, "I am very glad to see you, but I am equally glad to inform you that you are not wanted. Steinmetz will tell you all about it, and when you are ready for dinner it will be ready for you. I will give instructions that the men be cared for."

"Thanks. The funny thing is that I am instructed, with your approval, to put the place under martial law and take charge."

"That will not be necessary, thanks," answered Paul, going out of the open door to speak to the wild-looking Cossacks sent for his protection.

In Russia, as in other countries where life is cheaply held, the death formalities are small. It is only in England, where we are so careful for the individual and so careless of the type, that we have to pay for dying, and leave a mass of red-tape formalities for our friends.

While the young officer was changing his uniform for the evening finery which his servant's forethought had provided, Paul and Steinmetz hurriedly arranged what story of the evening should be given to the world. Knowing the country as they did they were enabled to tell a true tale, which was yet devoid of that small personal interest that gossips love. And all the world ever knew was that the Princess Howard Alexis was killed by the revolted peasants while attempting to escape by a side door, and that the Baron Claude de Chauxville, who was staying in the neighbourhood, met his death in attempting to save her from the fury of the mob.

On the recommendation of Karl Steinmetz, Paul placed the castle and village under martial law, and there and then gave the command to the young Cossack officer pending further instructions from his general commanding at Tver.

The officer dined with Steinmetz, and under the careful treatment of that diplomatist inaugurated a reign of military autocracy which varied pleasingly between strict discipline and boyish neglect.

Before the master of the situation had slept off the effect of his hundred-mile ride and a heavy dinner, Steinmetz and Maggie were ready to start on their journey to England.

The breakfast was served in the room abutting the cliff in the dim light of a misty morning.

The lamps were alight on the table, and Paul was waiting when Maggie came down cloaked for her journey. Steinmetz had breakfasted.

They said good morning, and managed to talk of ordinary things until Maggie was supplied with coffee and toast and a somewhat heavy, manly helping of a breakfast-dish. Then came a silence.

Paul broke it at length with an effort, standing as it were on the edge of the forbidden topic.

"Steinmetz will take you all the way," he said,

"and then come back to me. You can safely trust yourself to his care."

"Yes," answered the girl, looking at the food set before her with a helpless stare. "It is not that. Can I safely trust Etta's memory to your judgment. You are very stern, Paul. I think you might easily misjudge her. Men do not always understand a woman's temptations."

Paul had not sat down. He walked away to the window, and stood there looking out into the gloomy mists.

"It is not because she was my cousin," said Maggie from the table; "it is because she was a woman leaving her memory to be judged by two men who are both—hard."

Paul neither looked round nor answered.

"When a woman has to form her own life, and renders it a prominent one, she usually makes a huge mistake of it," said the girl.

She waited a moment, and then she pleaded once more, hastily, for she heard a step approaching.

"If you only understood everything you might think differently—it is because you cannot understand."

Then Paul turned round slowly.

"No," he said, "I cannot understand it, and I do not think that I ever shall."

And Steinmetz came into the room.

In a few minutes the sleigh bearing Steinmetz and Maggie disappeared into the gloom, closely followed by a couple of Cossacks acting as guard and carrying despatches.

So Etta Sydney Bamborough—the Princess Howard Alexis—came back after all to her husband, lying in a nameless grave in the churchyard by the Volga at Tver. Within the white walls — beneath the shadow of the great spangled cupola—they await the Verdict, almost side by side.

CHAPTER XXII.

BETWEEN Brandon in Suffolk and Thetford in Norfolk runs a quiet river, the Little Ouse, where few boats break the stillness of the water. On either bank stand whispering beech-trees, and so low is the music of the leaves, that the message of Ely's distant bells floats through them on a quiet evening as far as Brandon and beyond it.

Three years after Etta's death, in the glow of an April sunset, a Canadian canoe was making its stealthy way up the river. The paddle crept in and out so gently, so lazily and peacefully, that the dabchicks and waterfowl did not cease their chatter of nests and other April matters as the canoe glided by.

So quiet, indeed, was its progress that Karl Steinmetz—suddenly white-headed, as strong old men are apt to find themselves—did not heed its approach. He was sitting on the bank with a gun, a little rifle lying on the grass beside him. He was half-asleep in the enjoyment of a large Havana cigar. The

rays of the setting sun peeping through the lower branches made him blink lazily like a large good-natured cat.

He turned his head slowly, with a hunter's consciousness of the approach of someone, and contemplated the canoe with a sense of placid satisfaction.

The small craft was passing in the shadow of a great tree—stealing over the dark unruffled depth. A girl dressed in white, with a large diaphanous white hat and a general air of brisk English daintiness, was paddling slowly and with no great skill.

"A picture," said Steinmetz to himself with Teutonic deliberation. "*Gott im Himmel!* what a pretty picture to make an old man young."

Then his grey eyes opened suddenly and he rose to his feet.

"Coloss-a-al!" he muttered. He dragged from his head a lamentable old straw hat and swept a courteous bow.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "ah, what happiness! After three years!"

Maggie stopped and looked at him with troubled eyes; all the colour slowly left her face.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. And there was something like fear in her voice.

"No harm, Mademoiselle, but good. I have

come down from big game to vermin. I have here a saloon rifle. I wait till a water-rat comes and then I shoot him."

The canoe had drifted closer to the land, the paddle trailing in the water.

"You are looking at my white hairs," he went on in a sudden need of conversation. "Please bring your boat a little nearer."

The paddle twisted lazily in the water like a fish's tail.

"Hold tight," he said, reaching down.

With a little laugh he lifted the canoe and its occupant far up on to the bank.

"Despite my white hairs," he said, with a tap of both hands on his broad chest.

"I attach no importance to them," she answered, taking his proffered hand and stepping over the light bulwark. "I have grey ones myself. I am getting old too."

"How old?" he asked, looking down at her with his old bluntness.

"Twenty-eight."

"Ah, your years are summers," he said; mine have turned to winters. Will you sit here where I was sitting? See, I will spread this rug for your white dress."

Maggie paused, looking through the trees towards the sinking sun. The light fell on her face and showed one or two lines which had not been there before. It showed a patient tenderness in the steady eyes which had always been there—which Catrina had noticed in the stormy days that were past.

"I cannot stay long," she replied. "I am with the Faneaux at Brandon for a few days. They dine at seven."

"Ah, her ladyship is a good friend of mine. You remember her Charity Ball in town, when it was settled that you should come to Osterno. A strange world, Mademoiselle—a very strange world, so small, and yet so large and bare for some of us."

Maggie looked at him. Then she sat down.

"Tell me," she said, "all that has happened since then."

"I went back," answered Steinmetz, "and we were duly exiled from Russia. It was sure to come. We were too dangerous. Altogether too quixotic for an autocracy. For myself I did not mind, but it hurt Paul."

There was a little pause, while the water lapped and whispered at their feet.

"I heard," said Maggie, at length, in a measured voice, "that he had gone abroad for big game."

"Yes—to India."

"He did not go to America?" inquired Maggie indifferently. She was idly throwing fragments of wood into the river.

"No," answered Steinmetz, looking straight in front of him. "No, he did not go to America."

"And you?"

"I—oh, I stayed at home. I have taken a house. It is behind the trees. You cannot see it. I live at peace with all men and pay my bills every week. Sometimes Paul comes and stays with me. Sometimes I go and stay with him in London or in Scotland. I smoke, and shoot water-rats, and watch the younger generation making the same mistakes that we made in our time. You have heard that my country is in order again. They have remembered me. For my sins they have made me a count. *Bon Dieu!* I do not mind. They may make me a prince if it pleases them."

He was watching her face beneath his grim old eyebrows.

"These details bore you," he said.

"No."

"When Paul and I are together we talk of a new heaven and a new Russia. But it will not come in our time. We are only the sowers, and the harvest

is long. But I tell Paul that he has not sown wild oats, nor tares, nor thistles."

He paused, and the expression of his face changed to one of semi-humorous gravity.

"Mademoiselle," he went on, "it has been my lot to love the Prince like a son. It has been my lot to stand helplessly by while he passed through many troubles. Perhaps the good God gave him all his troubles at first. Do you think so?"

Maggie was looking straight in front of her across the quiet river.

"Perhaps," she said.

Steinmetz also stared in front of him during a little silence. The common thoughts of two minds may well be drawn together by the contemplation of a common object. Then he turned towards her.

"It will be a happiness for him to see you," he said quietly.

Maggie ceased breaking small branches and throwing them into the river. She ceased all movement, and scarcely seemed to breathe.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"He is staying with me here."

Maggie glanced toward the canoe. She drew a short sharp breath, but she did not move.

"Mademoiselle," said Steinmetz earnestly, "I am

an old man, and in my time I have dabbled pretty deeply in trouble. But taking it all round, even my life has had its compensations. And I have seen lives which, taken as mere mortal existences—without looking to the hereafter at all—have been quite worth the living. There is much happiness in life to make up for the rest. But that happiness must be firmly held. It is so easily slipped through the fingers. A little irresolution—a little want of moral courage—a little want of self-confidence—a little pride and it is lost. You follow me?"

Maggie nodded. There was a great tenderness in her eyes—such a tenderness as, resting on men, may bring them nearer to the angels.

Steinmetz laid his large hand over hers.

"Mademoiselle," he went on, "I believe that the good God sent you along this lonely river in your boat. Paul leaves me to-morrow. His arrangements are to go to India and shoot tigers. He will sail in a week. There are things of which we never speak together—there is one name that is never mentioned. Since Osterno you have avoided meeting him. God knows I am not asking for him anything that he would be afraid to ask for himself. But he also has his pride. He will not force himself in where he thinks his presence unwelcome."

Steinmetz rose somewhat ponderously and stood looking down at her. He did not, however, succeed in meeting her eyes.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "I beg of you most humbly—most respectfully—to come through the garden with me towards the house, so that Paul may at least know that you are here."

He moved away and stood for a moment with his back turned to her looking towards the house. The crisp rustle of her dress came to him as she rose to her feet.

Without looking round he walked slowly on. The path through the trees was narrow, two could not walk abreast. After a few yards Steinmetz emerged on to a large sloping lawn with flower-beds, and a long low house above it. On the covered terrace a man sat at a table writing. He was surrounded by papers, and the pen in his hand moved rapidly over the sheet before him.

"We still administer the estate," said Steinmetz in a low voice. "From our exile we still sow our seed."

They approached over the mossy turf, and presently Paul looked up—a strong face—stern and self-contained; the face of a man who would always have a purpose in life, who would never be petty in thought or deed.

For a moment he did not seem to recognise them. Then he rose, and the pen fell on the flags of the terrace.

"It is Mademoiselle!" said Steinmetz, and no other word was spoken.

Maggie walked on in a sort of unconsciousness. She only knew that they were all acting an inevitable part, written for them in the great playbook of life. She never noticed that Steinmetz had left her side, that she was walking across the lawn alone.

Paul came to meet her, and took her hand in silence. There was so much to say that words seemed suddenly valueless; there was so little to say, that they were unnecessary.

For that which these two had to tell each other cannot be told in minutes nor yet in years; it cannot even be told in a lifetime, for it is endless, and runs through eternity.

THE END.

Bayerische
Staatsbibliothek
München

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.

April 1896.

Tauchnitz Edition.

Latest Volumes:

(*Continued from page 2 of cover.*)

The Chronicles of Count Antonio.

A New Novel by **Anthony Hope.**

1 vol.

Jude the Obscure.

A New Novel by **Thomas Hardy.**

2 vols.

Roman Gossip.

A New Work by **Frances Minto Elliot.**

1 vol.

Miss Devereux of the Mariquita.

A New Novel by **Richard Henry Savage.**

2 vols.

In a Hollow of the Hills, etc.

The Newest Stories by **Bret Harte.**

1 vol.

The Sorrows of Satan.

A New Novel by **Marie Corelli.**

2 vols.

Teuton Studies.

A New Work by **Sidney Whitman.**

1 vol.

(*Continued on last page of cover.*)

April 1896.

Tauchnitz Edition.

Latest Volumes:

(*Continued from page 3 of cover.*)

The Red Cockade.

A New Novel by **Stanley J. Weyman.**

2 vols.

The Dancer in Yellow.

A New Novel by **W. E. Norris.**

1 vol.

A Point of Conscience.

A New Novel by Mrs. **Hungerford.**

2 vols.

The Master of the Musicians.

A New Novel by **Emma Marshall.**

1 vol.

Sir Robert's Fortune.

A New Novel by Mrs. **Oliphant.**

2 vols.

The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard.

A New Work by **A. Conan Doyle.**

1 vol.

The Tauchnitz Edition is to be had of all Booksellers and Railway Libraries on the Continent, price ℳ 1,60. or 2 francs per volume. A complete Catalogue of the Tauchnitz Edition is attached to this work.

3105

Buchbinderei
Wawrzyniak & Singer
rktplatz

BSB Bayerische StaatsBibliothek

MDZ Münchener DigitalisierungsZentrum Digitale Bibliothek

Merriman, Henry Seton

The sowers

Bd.: 2

1896

P.o.angl. 224 m-8
urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11906605-4